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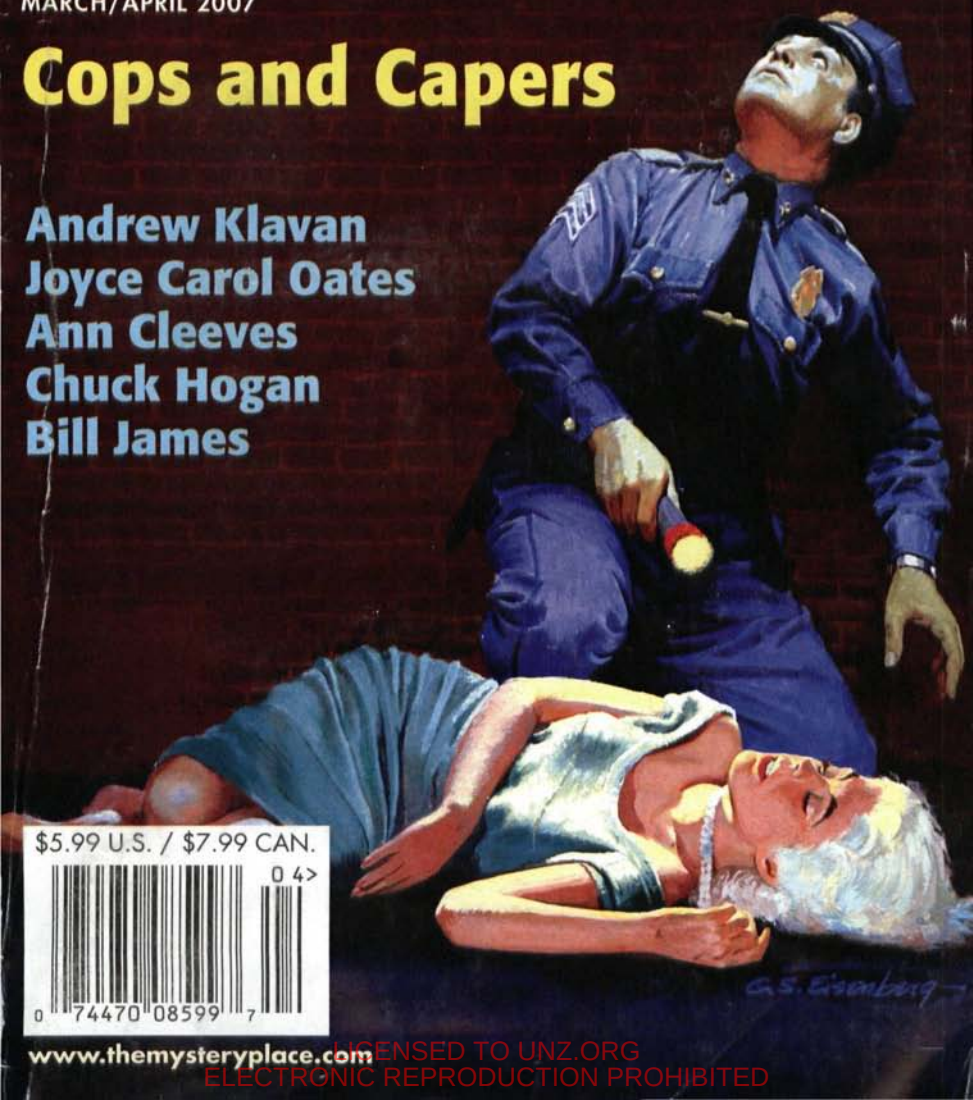

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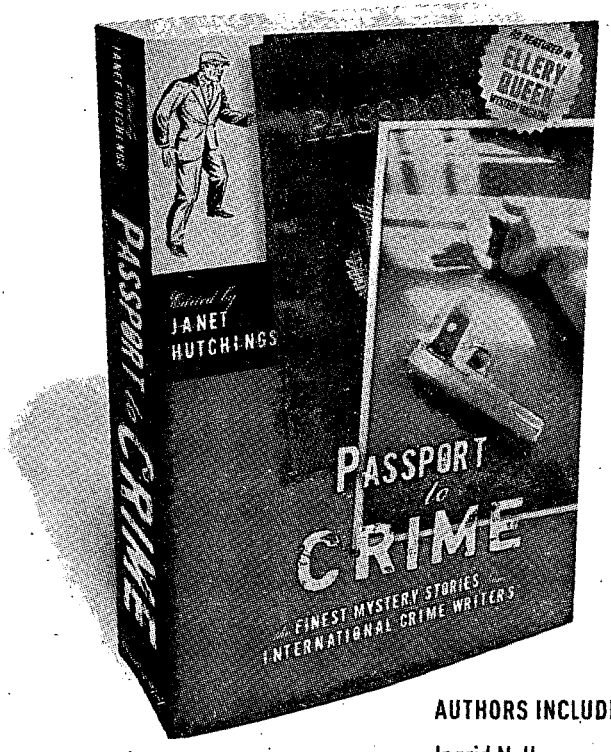

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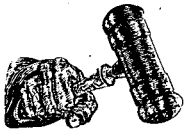

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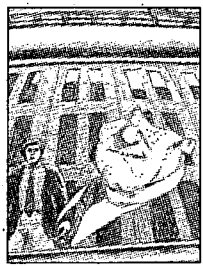

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GOING BACK

by Ann Cleeves

Susan had thought she would recognise the place immediately. The pictures in her head were solid and precise. She revisited them regularly, saw them like photos. The grey line of houses surrounded by grey hills. The school playground only separated from fields by a low stone wall, so the wind blowing across it chapped their lips and turned their fingers blue. The tubular steel climbing frame where she'd hung from her knees, her skirt falling over her upper body and the three girls in the corner of the yard sniggering and pointing, shouting at the boys to look. *We can see your knickers! We can see your knickers!* The chimney-shaped stove in the junior classroom, which the caretaker filled with coke and which belched out sulphur-tasting fumes. Her mother's mouth crimped in disapproval.

But everything was different. The village had become a fashionable place to live, within easy commuting distance of Leeds. You could tell that rich people lived here. The school had been converted into a picture from a glossy magazine. Through plate-glass windows you could see a pale wood mezzanine floor and exposed beams. Susan wondered if there was any chance of seeing inside, of smelling the wood and touching the heavy fabric of the curtains. Changes to

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the School House, where she'd lived, were more modest, but the lines of the severe square box had been softened by a conservatory and hanging baskets. In her memory she saw the house through drizzle and fog. Her mother's resentment at being forced to live there had imposed its own microclimate. Today there was the pale, lemon sunshine of early spring.

And she was back. A fiftieth birthday present to herself. What did they call it? Exorcising ghosts.

Winner of the 2006 Duncan Lawrie Dagger for her novel *Raven Black* (Macmillan), Ann Cleeves works with libraries developing services for readers. The Dagger judges said of her winning book: "Superb sense of place. A depiction of an enclosed community with modern and entrenched values constantly competing. A thrilling read." Her new book: *Hidden Depths*.

So she stood for a moment trying to find her bearings. She sensed Tom's impatience, but this was her time. Let him wait. She stared fiercely down the road, then closed her eyes and laid the pattern of houses over the landscape of her memory.

"They've widened the lane," she said. "The verge was deeper then."

He kept quiet. He knew it was important not to say the wrong thing.

When they'd moved here from Leeds, her mother had called it a cultural desert. It had been her father's first headship and he'd had no real choice in the matter. He hadn't fitted in at his previous school and had been told by the director of education to apply. He had no vocation for teaching. In the war he'd been happy, had hoped the fighting would go on forever. Afterwards, what could he do? The government needed teachers and would pay him to train.

Her mother had met him when he was a mature student and had rather liked the idea of marrying a teacher. It was a respectable profession. Perhaps she pictured him in a gown taking assembly in an oak-panelled hall. Susan thought she couldn't have been aware then of the reality—the poor pay, the grubby children who wet their pants and carried nits. Her father didn't have the academic qualification to teach in a grammar school. He was reduced to drilling the times tables into the heads of bored seven-year-olds, to supervising the half-dressed prancing to Music and Movement on the wireless. It was no job, he said, for a grown man.

And this, he had to admit, was no real headship. There were only thirty children, fifteen infants and fifteen juniors. He took the juniors in one classroom and Miss Pritchard took the infants in the other. Susan's mother never liked Miss Pritchard, who was plump, comfortable, and vacuous. She liked nothing about the village at all. All she could think of was moving back to the city.

The house was always cold. Even in summer the damp in the

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walls and the floor seeped into your bones. The wind blew over the Pennines and under the doors. Susan remembered the building in black and white, like the fuzzy pictures on the television in the corner of the front room. Her parents sat every evening in silence watching television, surrounded by their utility furniture, the few good pieces of china her mother had inherited from a well-off aunt, an inscribed tankard which had been given to her father when he left his last school. And always, sometimes even drowning out the voices on the TV, there was the sound of the sheep on the hill. Like a baby crying in the distance.

Susan had escaped outside, to ride her bike down the lane and play on the climbing frame in the schoolyard. Always on her own. Nobody wanted to be friends with the teacher's lass. They were frightened she'd tell on them. She saw them sometimes, the other girls, Heather and Diane and Marilyn, sitting on the pavement outside the council houses down the hill, their heads together over some game. She never went to join them. She knew she wouldn't be welcome and besides, her mother didn't like her mixing. But she watched them. She always knew what they were up to.

She had been so strong then, so easy in her body. She'd walked miles across the hills. There'd been handstands against the wall, reckless slides across ice on the playground, cartwheels. Her mother hadn't approved. If she saw her daughter on the climbing frame she'd rap on the kitchen window to call her into the house.

"What's the matter?" Susan knew how to play the innocent. She'd had to learn.

"Behaving like that. Showing your underwear to that boy." The boy was Eddie Black, a slow, gentle fifteen-year-old who lived in the cottage next to the school. He spent much of his time in the garden, in a wire mesh aviary, caring for his birds.

Susan wondered why that was so wrong. Why was that different from doing Music and Movement in front of her father? Or his coming into her bedroom when she was dressing? But she said nothing. She knew it was impossible to argue with her mother when her mouth was stretched in that thin-lipped way. When the sherry bottle was uncorked on the kitchen table and the first glass was already empty.

One evening stuck in her memory. It had been just before Easter and her mother had gone into Leeds to a concert. *The Messiah.* She'd driven herself in the black Morris Minor. An adventure, but an ordeal. She'd never enjoyed driving. When she returned she was a different woman. Susan thought, if she'd bumped into her in the street, she wouldn't have recognised her, the colour in her cheeks, the way she stood. It was like coming back to the village today and not recognising it. Susan had sat on the stairs wrapped up in the candlewick dressing gown listening to her mother's voice.

"Let's move, Philip. Please can we move back? A fresh start."

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She hadn't heard her father's answer, but the next day nothing had changed and the move was never mentioned again. She couldn't tell if anything was different between them.

And me? Susan wondered. What was I feeling in this house I don't know anymore? Nothing. I crept around on the edge of their lives, frozen and silent, trying above all not to make things worse. In school it was the same. Making myself invisible so they wouldn't poke and pinch and jeer. I only felt alive when I was outside, when I was running or climbing. Or watching.

"Well?" Tom asked, breaking into her memories.

"The gate into the field's in the same place."

It could even be the same gate. It was green with lichen and sagging on its hinges. The same sound of wind and sheep. The quarry had finished working even before her day. Now only a tractor would go through occasionally. This was rough grazing and took little work.

"We used to have Sports Day in that field, the flat bit near the gate. The quarry's up the hill."

She said *used to* but as far as she could remember it had only happened once. Her father must have made some arrangement with the farmer. They'd all trooped out through the open gate. No uniform sports kit. It wasn't that sort of school. She was the only one with an Airtex shirt and navy blue shorts. Heather wore a cotton dress, very short. The fashion. She was in her last year of juniors and already had breasts, which bounced as she ran. Not that she'd put much effort into the running. It had been a simpering show. She'd looked around her making sure they were all watching. But Susan had won the race. She'd crossed the line even before the boys. *That'll show them,* she'd thought. Flying across the field, she'd felt triumphant. This small world was hers. Let the other girls say what they liked. And of course they'd had plenty to say. Real girls didn't run. Not like that.

Now, middle-aged, she felt the first twinges of arthritis in her shoulders and her knees. She was overweight and unfit. All her movements were tentative. She'd never have that freedom again. The confidence to balance, arms outstretched, on the top bar of the farm gate. That sense of running over the uneven grass. She caught her breath to prevent a wail of loss and regret.

Soon after Sports Day, Heather Mather had gone missing. At first everyone thought she'd run away, hitched a lift into Leeds or sneaked onto the Secondary Modern bus. She was a flighty thing. "Too old for her years," said Mrs. Tillotson, the widow who took the Sunday school and played the out-of-tune organ in the church. A policeman came to the school and talked to them all in turn, looking very big and clumsy sitting on one of the children's chairs, his bum hanging over each side. They hadn't laughed at him. They knew he was trying to be friendly. Her father had stood at the front of the class, watching and frowning. Even if Susan had wanted to

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tell the policeman what she knew about Heather Mather and where she was, it would be quite impossible with her father listening in.

Then, when Heather didn't return, the word in the village was that Eddie Black had taken her. Eddie lived with his mother and though he'd left school, he didn't work. Susan knew Eddie hadn't taken Heather. He wouldn't know how to hurt her. He was painfully careful when he held his birds, and once when Susan had tripped and fallen, grazing her knee so it bled, he had cried. But everyone in the village said he'd taken her. One night someone threw a rock through Mrs. Black's bedroom window. The next morning Eddie woke up to find that two of his birds were dead. Their necks had been twisted. He stood in his garden and looked round him, bewildered, his mouth slightly open, as if he couldn't really understand what had happened.

Heather never turned up and her body was never found. The police wanted to charge Eddie with her murder, but decided that they had insufficient evidence. Even in those days, more was needed than neighbourhood gossip and a gut feeling that the boy was odd. They needed a body.

Beside her, Tom coughed. He didn't want this to last all day. He wanted to be home in Durham before it got dark. He knew it was important, but he was a great one for routine. He liked to get his dinner on time. Susan untied the frayed baler twine which attached the gate to the post, lifted it on its hinges over the long grass, and they walked through.

"This way," she said. "Mind, though, it's a bit of a walk."

Heather Mather had boyfriends nobody knew anything about. Not a real boyfriend. Not a lad her own age to have a giggle with, holding hands on the way down from the hill. Games of doctors and nurses in the shed at the bottom of the garden, brief forbidden kisses and flushed red faces. The other girls played games like that, but not Heather. She *was* too old for her years, as Mrs. Tillotson had said, and when she thought no one was looking she had a watchful, wary look. Sometimes Susan thought if she hadn't been the teacher's daughter, they might have been friends. Heather's boyfriends were older. They were men, not boys. She got into their cars and drove off with them and when she got back she lied about where she'd been. Even to Marilyn and Diane.

Uncle Alec took me to the pictures in town.

And Uncle Alec lied about it, too.

It were a good film, weren't it, love?

His arm around her, protective, as they stood on the short strip of pavement, the only pavement in the village, outside her house. Alec Mather, her dad's brother, who worked as gamekeeper on the big estate, who was tall and strong and carried a gun. Who had a dog that would do anything Alec told it, that would go through fire for him, everyone said, but that snarled and bared its teeth at

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anyone else. Susan tried for a moment to remember the name of the dog. Why wouldn't it come to her, when everything else was so clear? Soon she gave up. She had other, more disturbing memories.

It hadn't been Alec's car Heather had climbed into, her skirt riding up so she nearly showed *her* knickers, the first time Susan had watched her. It could have been one of Alec's friends who was driving. He was about the same age, dark hair greased back, a tattoo on the back of his hand. And later, when he dropped Heather back in the lane down to the church, Alec was there to meet them. When Heather wasn't looking (though Susan was, hiding at the top of a high stone wall which surrounded the churchyard) the stranger handed him a five-pound note. Alec slipped it quickly into the pocket of his jacket. The wall was nearly three feet thick, covered with ivy and overhung with branches. Susan could remember the smell of the ivy even now, as they walked across the field, up the hill towards the quarry. This was the first of several encounters she witnessed over the months. Sometimes the men were strangers and sometimes she recognised them. Money usually changed hands.

Would she have described this to the friendly policeman when he came to the classroom to ask about Heather if her father hadn't been there, listening in? Perhaps she would. Then everything would have been different. Her whole life. She wouldn't be here walking up the hill with Tom on an April afternoon.

After that day she watched Heather more closely. She listened to the women talking after church. Heather's father had gone away to work. He'd got a job as a cook in the merchant navy. Alec spent a lot of time with the family to keep an eye on things. It only made sense.

And one afternoon Susan watched Heather climb into her father's car, the teacher's car. It was soon after Sports Day, at the start of the school holidays, one of those rare hot, still days. In the house there had still been a chill caused by the rotting walls and her parents' antagonism. Her father said he had an NUT meeting in Leeds and her mother wanted a lift into town. He'd told her it wasn't possible. He'd promised a lift to colleagues from the villages on the way. There wouldn't be room in the Morris for Sylvia, too. She'd sulked, fetched the sherry from the sideboard, which she only did at lunchtime when she was severely provoked. Outside it was airless. Susan felt the sun burning her bare arms and legs, beating up from the tarmac of the playground. She went to her nest on the churchyard wall not to watch but to find some shade.

She saw Heather first. She was on her own. No Alec. No Marilyn and Diane. She walked slowly down the lane, her head bent, looking down at her sandals. In September she'd move on to the big school and already Susan could sense that gulf between them. It was very quiet. There was a wood pigeon calling from the trees behind the church and the distant, inevitable sheep. Then a car engine and the Morris Minor, squat and shiny as a beetle, drove slowly past. It

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stopped just beyond Heather. She didn't change her pace or look up, but when she reached the passenger door, she opened it and got in. Despite the sun reflected from the car's bonnet, which made her screw up her eyes, Susan was frozen. She wanted to shout out. *Hello. Heather. Look at me. Come and play.* Anything to stop her climbing into the car. But the words wouldn't come. The car pulled slowly away, backed into the church entrance to turn, then drove off.

Alec was there when it returned. He was leaning against the wall, turning his face to the sun, so close to Susan that she could almost have reached out and touched his hair. The dog was with him, lying on the road, its tongue out, panting. Her father was alone in the car. The window was open and she could see his face, very red. He was furious.

"You cheated me," he said. It was a hiss, not a whisper. Alec hadn't moved from the wall and if her father had spoken more softly he wouldn't have been heard. Susan thought he sounded a bit like one of the little boys in the infants' class, complaining about a stolen toy. *It's not fair.* That was what her father meant, even if he didn't say it.

"She came with you, didn't she?" Still Alec leaned against the wall, his arms folded against his chest, that smile on his face.

"But she wouldn't even let me . . ."

"That were down to you, weren't it? She's only a slip of a thing."

"For Christ's sake, man."

"Anyway, that were the deal. Ten pounds. No going back now. Any road, it's already spent. Where is she?"

"Up on the hill. Near the quarry. We went for a walk. I thought . . ." He didn't finish the sentence.

"Aye, well, I reckon she'll come down in her own time. I'll have a word. Make her see sense. You can fix up to take her out later, if you like."

Her father didn't reply. He didn't mention the money again, though money was always tight in their house. It was one of the things her parents fought about. He wound up the window and drove off. She wondered where he went. Not to the union meeting. He wouldn't have had time to get to Leeds and back. Later, though, when it was dark outside and they were watching the television, he talked about the resolutions they'd discussed at the meeting and the men he'd met. Susan would have been entirely taken in if she hadn't known he was lying. She wondered how many times he'd lied to them before. It was as if everything was a game and nothing was real anymore.

Heather didn't go home that night. That was the day she disappeared.

Susan thought she couldn't have been the only person in the village to know about Heather's men friends and how Alec organised it all. They must have seen the strangers' cars, realised there were nights when the gamekeeper had cash to spend in the pub. But

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nobody spoke. When the police asked questions the villagers talked about shy Eddie Black. Otherwise they kept their mouths firmly shut. Alec's dog had a mad eye and Alec had a fierce temper, even when he was smiling. They didn't want to know what had really happened to Heather.

Susan knew. When her father had driven off and Alec had sauntered back to the village, towards the house he shared with Heather's mum, she'd scrambled down from the wall, pulling away the ivy in her haste. Despite the heat she'd gone to the hill, running all the way. She hadn't opened the gate into the quarry field that day, she'd climbed it. Then, she'd been young and strong. From halfway up the hill, she'd seen Heather lying flat on her back at the edge of the old workings. At first she'd thought she was asleep, but as she approached, scattering the sheep in her path, she'd realised that the girl's eyes were open and there were tears on her cheeks.

Heather heard her coming. She must have done. By then Susan was out of breath, panting, and there'd be the sound of her footsteps and the sheep loping off. But she didn't sit up until the very last minute.

"Oh," she said. "It's you."

"Who were you expecting?" Susan demanded. "Alec? My dad?"

"Your father? He's pathetic."

That was what they always called *her.* It was the jeer that followed her around the playground. *You're pathetic, you are.* Shouted in turn by Marilyn, Diane, and Heather. It was the word that made her fight back.

"Not as pathetic as your dad. Moving out and letting Alec take up with your mam. Not as pathetic as you, going off with all those men, just because he tells you."

She was shocked by her own courage. She'd never stood up to one of them before. Heather was stunned too. She got to her feet but didn't say anything. Susan thought she might run down the hill and home. But she didn't. She just stared.

At last Heather spoke. "If you say anything at school, I'll tell them about your father. I'll tell them he made me go off with him."

"I wouldn't tell them!" Susan moved forward. "I never would." In her head she had a picture of the two of them, sitting on the pavement outside the council houses, friends brought together by the shared secret. Besides, who would she tell?

Heather must have seen the step towards her as a threat. She backed away, lost her footing, slipped. Susan might have been able to save her. She was strong. And there was a moment when she almost did it. When she almost reached out and grabbed the girl's arm. If she saved Heather's life, wouldn't she have to be her friend? But she decided not to. She wanted to see what it would look like. What Heather would look like rolling down the steep bank until she reached the overhang and fell into nothing. What sound she would

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make when she hit the stones below. It was as if all the watching had been leading up to this moment. And it was all very satisfactory, very satisfying. There was the expression of panic when Heather scrabbled to save herself and realised it was useless, the moment of flight, the dull thud. And then her undignified resting place amongst the rubble of quarry waste, her skirt around her waist, her legs spread out. Susan would have liked to leave her there for everyone to see.

But that wouldn't do. Someone might have seen Susan get over the gate into the field. Then there'd be questions she didn't want to answer. And Susan wanted to get closer to the body. She was curious now to see what it looked like. She peered down over the lip of the cliff to the face of the quarry where the stone had been hacked away. It was a difficult climb, but not impossible for her, not so very different from scrambling down from the churchyard wall. Only in scale. At the bottom she took a minute to catch her breath. She stood over Heather, who didn't really look like Heather at all now. Then she rolled her close into the cliff face and piled her body with the loose rocks which lined the quarry bottom. That was more exhausting than the climb back. When she reached the top the sun was very low. She took one last look down the cliff. Because of the angle it was hard to see where Heather was lying and even if you could see the place it would look as if there'd been a small rock fall.

When she got in her mother told her off for being so filthy. *When are you going to start acting like a girl?* Her father talked about the union meeting. They watched television. There was shepherd's pie for tea.

The policeman came into school to ask his questions and later she wished she'd told him what had happened. She could have explained that it was an accident. She could have said she'd panicked. They'd have had to accept that. They'd have given her help. But perhaps by then it was already too late. The trouble was, she'd enjoyed it. The moment when Heather fell had been so exciting. It had the thrill and the power of running across the field on Sports Day, of crossing the line first. It had caused sparks in her brain. She'd wanted to recreate that buzzing sensation. She'd thought of nothing else. That was why she'd killed Eddie's birds. But birds aren't like people. It wasn't the same.

Tom wasn't much more fit than she was and it took them longer than she'd expected to walk up the hill to the disused quarry. Since her time they'd put up a fence and a couple of notices saying it was unsafe. It wasn't as deep as she'd remembered.

"That's where she is," she said. "Under that pile of rubble at the bottom of the cliff. That's where you'll find Heather Mather."

"So," he said. "The scene of your first crime."

"Oh no." She was offended. "Heather was an accident. Not like the others."

She liked Tom. He was her named officer at the prison. She'd

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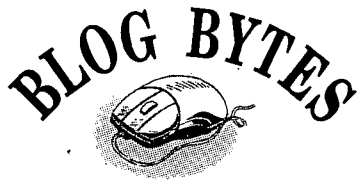
refused to speak to the detectives and the psychiatrists who'd tried to persuade her to tell them where Heather Mather was. Her first victim, as they called her. The first of four before she was caught. All pretty girls who simpered and pouted and made up to older men.

Tom spoke into his radio and she could already see the police officers who'd been waiting in the van coming through the gate. She let him take her arm and steer her down the hill. He'd be ready for his dinner. ●



by Ed Gorman

From the cozy to the hardboiled:

The following Agatha Christie site is one of the best organized and laid out I've seen. Christie's output was so prodigious it requires skill to present it in a simple coherent fashion. The types of mysteries and suspense novels she chose to write, her various triumphs as a playwright, her characters, her familiar themes—it's all here. Her history and her output are presented with such vitality that you think Dame Agatha may still be with us—hiding behind the curtain and sneaking a peek at us now and then. This site demonstrates the kind of important and impressive scholarship one can do on the Internet. **http://www.twbooks.co.uk/authors/achristie.html**

The Gumshoe Site, written and edited by Jiro Kimura, is filled with current news about the field in virtually every aspect, from awards to conventions to notable obituaries. Jiro also writes a column called "What's Cool" that points us to books and stories we might otherwise miss. Great information and a fun tour through the mystery world. **http://www.nsknet.or.jp/~jkimura**

Black Mask Magazine. "The namesake of this site, *Black Mask Magazine* is the pulp magazine that launched a thousand pulp-fiction dreams. This site will also incorporate *Dime Detective, Dime Mystery, Strange Detective Mysteries, Terror Tales, Horror Stories, Adventure,* and *Famous Fantastic Mysteries,* but great as they all were, *Black Mask Magazine* still reigns supeme, holding a unique place in our hearts and in American popular culture." Publisher-editor Keith Alan Deutsch has created a site not just for noir lovers but also for fans of pulp fiction in general. Interviews with the men and women who wrote for the pulps, stories from the era itself, and Deutch's enthusiastic promotion of *Black Mask* make this essential reading for pulp fans. **http://www.blackmaskmagazine.com/blackmask.html**

Ed Gorman's own blogs appear on **http://www.mysteryfile.com**.

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BROTHERS

by Ed Gorman

1.

When I rolled into the precinct just before eleven that humid August night, I saw my brother Michael walking out the west door.

I'd been able to get him on the force seven years ago, despite a still-ongoing hiring freeze, and he was generally doing well. It didn't hurt that at the time I'd just received an award for stopping a man who'd just killed three people in a convenience store. I'd chased him in my car, warning him in the dark alley to stop running. He had turned around and put three bullets in my windshield. I ran him over and killed him.

I'd asked the commander a few times before about hiring Michael. He knew about Michael's past and problems. He'd always said, "Let me think about it."

Since joining the department, Michael had become a dutiful cop. On other matters, which he insisted weren't my business, he wasn't doing well at all.

He worked the same shift I did but he was already in civvies: a crisp white short-sleeved shirt, dark slacks, and a brisk, slightly wood-scented cologne.

He must have been lost in his own thoughts, because he didn't see me until I almost walked into him.

"Hey," he said, looking up. "Didn't see you."

"I wanted to apologize for the other night."

He grinned the grin that had won him a hundred hearts. My little brother got the family's blond good looks. I got the family's work ethic. Or, as our mother always put it, "Little Mike got the looks, but Chet got the maturity." In her maternal way, she tried to pretend that both attributes were equal. Maturity, in case you

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hadn't noticed, has yet to get even one female into a bed.

He clapped me on the arm. "Hell, Chet, we're brothers. You were just looking out for me the way you have since Mom died."

When I was sixteen and Michael was twelve, Mom drowned in the YMCA pool after suffering a stroke. Freak accident. The news reports called it that, the Y called it that, the coroner called it that, the priest at the burial site called it that, everybody at the wake called it that. Even seventeen years later I wince when I hear that term.

Dad took over. Or tried. But he'd always been a better cop than a father. It was from his side of the family that the blond good looks came. For twenty-one years of marriage, Mom had been able to pretend that all the nights Dad spent carousing with other cops were spent bowling and playing nickel-dime poker. The only time I'd ever heard them argue about those nights was when a drunk lady called at two A.M. and demanded to talk to my dad.

Other cops, male and female, walked around us now, good-nights and goodbyes on the air thick as the fireflies.

"I'm not mad, Chet. I just want to run my own life. You don't need to play Dad anymore."

And I had been his dad all the way through high school. Made sure he got a B average, made sure he wasn't into drugs or alcohol, made sure he wasn't hanging around with the wrong boys, made sure he honored the curfew hours I set for him.

Dad spent more and more time away from the house. He got himself what he called a "woman friend" and half-ass moved in with her. One night when he was home and puke-drunk, I heard him sobbing—literally, sobbing—in the bedroom he'd shared with Mom all those years. I went in and dragged him to the bathroom and got him cleaned up and then ripped the covers with the vomit on them off and got him settled in. He grabbed my hand and gripped it hard, the way he used to. He didn't seem to realize that these days my grip was a lot harder than his. Before he passed out, he said: "You gotta watch Michael. He's gonna turn out just like me. And I was such a shitty husband to your poor mother, Chet." He started sobbing again. He wouldn't let go of my hand. "I'm goin' to hell, Chet, the way I treated that woman, always sneakin' off for some strange broad. You got to know that I loved her. She was the only woman I ever truly loved. Those bitches I ran around with didn't mean nothing to me. They really didn't."

Michael said, "It's just this little thing I'm having on the side, is all. It'll wear itself out."

"That's what you said four months ago."

His face hardened. His taint was to be amiable, kid you away from serious talk. But since that hadn't worked, he coasted for a while on irritation that would soon become real anger if he wasn't

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careful. "Look, I admit I screwed up my life back there when I first left home. I gambled, I did some drugs, I married the wrong woman, I couldn't hold a job—and I let you take over my life the same way you did when I was a kid. And that really helped, Chet. And I'm really grateful for it. I mean, how could I not be? You found my second wife for me, you got me on the force, and you managed to find a bank that would give me a mortgage even with *my* credit rating." He put both of his hands on my shoulders. He was three inches taller than I was. "I owe you everything, Chet. Everything. But this time—" He shook his head. Then he shot me the Michael grin again. "This time it isn't any of your business. All right? I know what I'm doing. I'm not going to hurt Laura or the kids. That I promise. But I'm in this thing and I just have to play it out is all." His hands shook my shoulders with mock fondness—mock because he was sick of me trying to drag him away from the affair he was having. The affair that had put him right back into gambling, drinking too much, even getting into a few fights. Fights can get you kicked off the force.

He took his hands down. "So can we leave it like that, Chet? Please? I'll handle it, everything'll be cool, and we'll get together at Jen's birthday party a couple weeks from now and everything'll be fine. All right?"

He walked away before I could say anything, got in his car, and drove off. I hadn't known until that moment that he'd bought himself a new Pontiac GTO. I didn't know another uniformed officer who could afford a new GTO and have any money left over for the wife and kids.

The call came a few months later. Laura, Michael's wife.

"I'm sure you're watching the football game," she said. I'd met her years ago at a grade school. I had been there to tell the kids about being a policeman. Laura was a slender, dark-haired young woman with a very pretty face spoiled only by a quick, nervous smile that revealed the stress she always seemed to feel. This was at the time when Michael had neared the height of his problems—no job, into some gamblers for several thousand dollars, and drinking way more than he should have been. Laura herself was just getting through a divorce, a husband who'd run around on her. Neither of them wanted to meet the other, but I stage-mothered the relationship until it found its own way.

"Actually, no. Jen's volunteering at the hospital tonight, so I'm here with the kids. I just cattle-prodded them into bed, in fact."

A strained laugh. "They're just like ours. They hate going to bed." Then: "Could we talk a little, Chet?"

"Sure. That's what brothers-in-law are for."

So this was to be the night. I knew that it would happen and that when it did a whole lot of things would change. I thought of

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what Dad had told me the night he'd drunkenly admitted he'd been such a terrible husband: that I was to keep Michael from repeating his mistakes. I wondered how much Laura knew. I was about to find out.

"I don't think Michael loves me anymore."

"Oh, come on. You know better than that."

"He used to come straight home after work. He'd only hang out at that cop bar once a week. But now—three or four nights a week he doesn't get home until three in the morning. And he hasn't had much to drink. That's what makes me suspicious."

"I guess I'm not following you there."

"Well, he always tells me he's just at the bar with the boys. Well, first of all, the bar closes at two, and it's only about a mile away. It sure doesn't take him that long to drive home. But even worse than that—he's never drunk."

"Well, that's a good thing, isn't it, that he's cut back on his drinking?" I tried to put a smile into it.

"But I know him well enough to know that if he was at that bar, he'd be drunk when he came home." Cop wives always say "that bar" when referring to the Golden Chalice. They hate it because they know all about the cop groupies who hang out there.

She said: "Would you talk to him, Chet?"

"I'd be happy to. But you know how he resents me sometimes."

"You know how I feel about that. And I've told him so. You were in a situation where you were forced to be his father. You had to give up a lot of things other boys your age got to do—and all for his sake. I always tell him that."

"I appreciate it, Laura. But that doesn't mean he'll be any happier if I butt into your marriage."

A long pause: "Then how about a little spying?"

"Spying?"

"Just seeing what he's up to after your shift ends. Where he goes and things like that." This time her laugh was real but sad. "I know this is awful. I'd sure resent it if somebody spied on me. But our marriage—it hasn't been any good for quite a while."

For a moment I was back in the parking lot and Michael was explaining to me, as if I were slightly retarded, how everything was under control. He had his mistress and he had his family, and according to him, he was doing well by both of them.

"Maybe I shouldn't have called, Chet. I'm just so—"

She started crying. I let her get through the worst of it. Michael was doing it all over again. He'd lost a first wife who'd been every bit the player he was. But this woman was different. Only through her had he finally put his life on track. And now he was turning away from her.

"I'm sorry, Chet." The tears became sniffles. "I just feel so isolated, I guess. I'm sorry I called."

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"Tell you what. I'm going to do a little looking around. I'll be back to you in a day or so."

"I'm sorry I'm so needy, Chet."

"I'm needy, too. I want to find out what's going on. We've both got a stake in this, Laura, believe me." I made a joke of it before hanging up: "I didn't spend all those years raising him so he'd act this way."

2.

Three A.M. Sitting in my boxers. Staring at the glow of the guttering fire we'd set to chase the autumn cold away.

I heard Jen coming down the stairs, her slippers flapping with each step. When she reached the living room, I said, "Leave the lights off, please."

She came over, the hem of her long cotton robe whispering across the hardwood floor. She sat on her haunches next to my armchair. Bare branches scraped the windows in the whistling wind. Shadow goblins played on the walls.

"So what seems to be troubling our baby boy tonight?"

"Sometimes I *wish* I were a baby boy." Then: "Michael. Of course."

She touched my wide coarse hand with her long smooth one. "Now I'm going out to the kitchen and get that .45 you taught me how to shoot. And then I'm going to come back and kill one of us. And at this point I really don't care which one of us it is. Because if I ever hear that you're brooding about him again—"

"He's my brother."

"Oh yes, and you swore to your father you'd raise him right."

"Don't make fun of that. I gave him my word."

"Yes, and that was the right thing to do. When Michael was still a boy. But he's almost thirty now. He has a wife and two children. You got him a job, you found him a wife, and you've been playing daddy to him right straight through. It's not right, honey. Or normal."

For some reason that irritated me. Normal. What was abnormal about taking care of your kid brother?

"If I don't take care of him, who will?"

"Oh, let's see—maybe himself. He's an adult, Chet. At least that's what it says on his driver's license. You have your own family and your own problems you need to take care of. You can't keep spending all your time on him. It's unnatural."

Abnormal. Unnatural.

"You know how selfish that sounds?"

"Selfish? What're you talking about?"

"That I shouldn't worry about my own little brother?"

"Worry, fine. But try to turn his life around—no way." Her hand had pulled from mine a minute ago. Now she used it as a lever on the arm of the chair to pull herself up. "You know I don't like him.

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But sometimes I can't help myself—I feel sorry for him, the way you're always putting yourself in his business. I understand why he resents you, Chet. I really do."

And then the line I hated most where my little brother was concerned: "You could always see the police shrink. I really think it's something you should talk through. We've been arguing about this since we first started dating. And it never seems to get any better."

"And you never stop saying that I should see the police shrink."

She was all done with banter. Tears trembled in her voice. "You ever think that's because I love you? You ever think how tired I am of all this? And I meant what I said about Michael. I feel sorry for him sometimes. I really do. But if he's going to screw up his life, that's his business."

"If it's his business, why did Laura call me today and tell me she's worried about their marriage?"

"Laura called you?"

"That's right. So if I'm butting in, it's because she asked me to."

"Oh, great," Jen said. "Now we've got her pulling you into their lives. This whole thing is insane." She started to walk back to the stairs. "I'm going to sleep on the couch in the TV room. You need your sleep, so you take the bed."

I started to object but she stopped me.

"I'm too tired to argue about it, Chet. I'm taking the couch. I'll grab a blanket from the closet upstairs." Six steps up the staircase, she said, in a gentler tone, "I'll see you in the morning."

3.

I spent the next few days finding out what I could about Jane Cameron and found nothing I liked.

You couldn't call her rich, I suppose, but she did have the remains of a large inheritance to rely on if she needed it for her business, which was public relations. You would have to call her beautiful. College-girl beautiful, though she was mid-thirties—fine, clean features; gym-trim body; and a radiant blond presence in any environment. A ten-year-old daughter conveniently locked away at a boarding school in Vermont. Two ex-husbands, several lovers, at least three of whom had been married at the time. A few very public and very angry scenes with angry wives.

As I sat at my computer looking at her photos, I realized what my little brother was living out here. He'd met her the night a jilted lover of hers had assaulted her in the lobby of her expensive condo. Michael and his partner were the first on the scene. It probably hadn't taken long for Michael to find himself in the sort of bad movie he used to star in frequently. Married cop intrigued by fashionable, vulnerable beauty cheats on family, honor, good sense.

For three nights, I followed him. Twice he left work to meet her at the bar across the street from her condo, the bar where all the

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successful young lawyers in town like to do their cheating. An hour of drinks there and back across the street to her condo. The third night, still in uniform, he went straight home. In my talk with Laura, she'd said this was his standard pattern, but she was still hoping none of this had to do with a woman, that he was just carousing with the boys.

One night I took my camera and got some good snaps of them making out in the parking lot of the bar.

I put them in a manilla envelope and set them in the front seat of his new Pontiac.

The next night, when I got off shift, I found them sitting on the front seat of my own car.

He came over, still in uniform, and slid into the shotgun seat.

"You really think I wouldn't figure out you were behind this bullshit?"

"I wanted you to know, Michael. If you hadn't figured it out, I would've told you."

"You're insane, you know that? Clinically, I mean. Off your damned rocker."

"You know anything about her, Michael?"

"Sure I know about her. She's a very beautiful and a very successful woman."

"And she has a lot of enemies."

"That's because she's so successful."

"That's because she's slept with so many important men around town."

"People change."

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

"In Japan they get their hymens sewn back in for the wedding. She thinking of doing that, is she?"

"Be careful here, man. You may still be able to take me, but I can put a lot of hurt on you."

I stared straight ahead. Sighed.

"So now it's supposed to be serious, Michael?"

"Isn't 'supposed to be.' Is."

"I thought it was going to end."

Now it was Michael who stared straight ahead and sighed.

"I'm not sure what to do, Chet."

"Take out that picture of your kids in your billfold and look at it for a while. That'll tell you what to do."

Silence for a time.

"You know how good a woman you've got in that wife of yours, Michael."

"Of course I know."

"And you treat her like this, anyway?"

"We're different, is all, Chet. You and me, I mean. You're satisfied to sit home and watch TV and I want—"

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"Excitement."

"Not exactly. Not the way you mean. Not running around and getting all boozed up and hanging out in clubs. It's just—I'm starting to feel old, Chet. I'm young. But when I met Jane I realized that mentally I'd become an old man. She didn't make me feel young exactly, but I didn't feel old anymore, either. I'm a better cop now because of her. I know that sounds funny, but it isn't. She really thinks it's true. I'm even thinking about taking the test for detective."

"Laura wanted you to do that two years ago."

"Yeah, but with Laura it was different. It was just because I'd make more money. But with Jane, being a detective isn't just about that, it's because being a detective is—"

"Cool."

"God, Chet, you don't understand any of this."

"I don't think you do, either. You're getting a nice piece of ass on the sly and you think it's worth destroying your family for."

"I'm going to go now. I can't sit here and let you lay all this on me. Remember when I called you The Pope once? Well, you haven't changed. You think you can run my life from this big-ass throne you sit on. But it doesn't work that way anymore, Michael. Maybe I am screwing up my life. I'm not stupid. I know what I'm doing is wrong. But right now I can't pull myself out of it. And you playing Pope isn't helping. You can't order me around anymore, Michael."

He opened the car door.

"Let me ask you one thing. It's my place to tell Laura. Not yours. So until I tell her about this, don't say anything to her. All right?"

I just stared at my big hands on the steering wheel.

"All right, Chet?" The anger coming back into his voice.

I could barely whisper. "All right, Michael."

4.

The next day, I started following her. I wanted to see where the best place was to have the conversation she was forcing on me.

Didn't take me long to figure out that there would be no opportunity to confront her during the day. Meetings all over town with her various important clients. I couldn't afford to brace her in any sort of public way.

Nothing to stop me wearing my uniform on my night off, though.

I had to make sure she was alone. I sat across the street from her fifteen-story condo. She swept her Jag—what else?—into the underground parking garage just after nine that night. She was alone.

I pulled in four spaces down from her. I reached the elevator before she did.

In the shadowy light, she wasn't able to see even my faint resemblance to Michael.

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"Did something happen here tonight?" she said.

She looked especially fine this evening in a silver suit, her golden hair pulled into a loose chignon.

"Happen?"

"When I saw your uniform, I thought maybe something had happened in the building tonight."

"Oh, no, ma'am. I'm here on my own. I'm just going to see somebody in the building."

She smiled. "Well, I love having a police officer around. Makes me feel safe."

The elevator door opened. We climbed in.

Then she said: "That's funny."

"What is?"

"Why aren't you in the lobby getting checked in by Lenny? He checks everybody in. Even cops."

I had been demoted from police officer to cop. She was smart. She knew there was something wrong with this situation.

I said, "I'll bet you said that to my brother."

"Your brother? What're you talking about?"

A bit of panic—just enough to be gratifying—shone in those azure eyes.

She didn't know it, but she'd already lost control of the situation. It was almost disappointing. I thought she'd be a lot tougher.

After she'd brought us whiskey sours, she sat on the divan across from my chair and said, "I hope you realize that all I have to do is pick up the phone and call my friend the police commissioner and your days as a cop are over, sweetie."

"And if that happens, 'sweetie,' then I'll get somebody to help me get a computer file of some of your messes we've had to help you with—especially a certain group of pissed-off wives—and I'll send that file straight to a friend of mine who's a reporter at KBST. And I'll do the same thing if you don't agree to break it off with my brother right away."

She smirked. "You're going to blackmail me out of seeing your brother?" She didn't wait for me to answer. "I can't believe you two are brothers. Michael's so handsome and intense and you're so—" She hesitated. "I may as well be up-front with you. You scare me."

"Good. I should scare you. You've got good instincts."

She exhaled harshly. I tried not to notice the way her long sleek legs were stretched out on the divan or the sheer blouse she wore now, having discarded the jacket to her suit. She kept a single shoe on a single big toe, dangling there. Like my brother's future.

"You'll dump him someday, anyway."

"I've been dumped, too, you know."

"Any tears go with this story?"

"It's true, you bastard, whether you believe it or not. I was

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dumped—twice, in fact—and I got hurt just like anybody else would. You make me sound like some sort of professional heartbreaker. I have parents I see three times a month and I have a daughter I love very much."

"So much you put her in boarding school."

Her eyes narrowed. She just watched me for a time, as if she was observing something in nature she'd never seen before. "Michael told me you were like this. So goddamned judgmental. He calls you The Pope."

"I'm judgmental about women who break up marriages."

"Michael told me you had an affair when you were about his age. Aren't you a little hypocritical here?"

I felt my cheeks burn. "I made up for it. I've never put a hand to another woman since."

"Mass three times a week? Confession every Saturday? Coach a Little League team? The perfect husband and father."

I finished my drink and set it down. "Thanks for the drink. I want to hear Michael tell me that you've broken it off."

"What if I don't?"

"We've already discussed that."

"You'll ruin me."

I waited until I was on my feet. "I'll sure give it my best shot."

"I really do love Michael."

"You're not what he needs. Laura is what he needs."

"I've never claimed to be anything other than what I am—a selfish, spoiled woman. But this time—with Michael—I really do love him. I never thought I'd do it again."

"Do what again?"

"Let somebody get me pregnant. I didn't want to be owned by a man or by a child. But with Michael—I stopped taking my birth control. I went to the doctor's last week. I haven't even told Michael yet. I want this child. I want Michael, too. But if I can't have him, at least I'll have his child."

I shrugged. I was trying to make sense of all this. But there was no sense to be made of it, none of it. A little fling, every man did it once in a while. Back when it started it had seemed nothing more than that. But now I was listening to her tell me that she was carrying Michael's baby.

All I could think of was poor Laura and the kids. I turned the knob on the door leading to the hall. I wanted to say something nasty. But then an old man's weariness overcame me. I didn't seem to have any strength left at all. Then words came: "I'll pay for an abortion. And Michael doesn't have to know about it."

She laughed. "You won't believe this, Mr. High and Mighty, but I don't believe in abortion. I may be a slut in your eyes, but I'm still a good little Catholic girl."

I turned my eyes back to hers and with the last of my strength, I

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said: "Then walk out of his life. He doesn't have the strength, but you do."

"That's the terrible thing," she said. "I don't have the strength, either."

5.

The next afternoon I tried to find my brother before his shift started. Sometimes he had coffee down the street at a luncheonette. He wasn't there. He wasn't in the precinct locker room, either.

"You didn't happen to see my brother, did you?" I asked Keller, who was spelling the watch commander, who was in Vegas at a police convention. Don't think there hadn't been a lot of jokes about holding a cop convention in Vegas.

"Bad sore throat and fever. Home sick."

"He call in himself?"

He gave me a sharp look.

"No, his wife did. Man, you gotta give the kid some breathing room, Chet. He calls in or Laura calls in. What's the difference?"

"Just curious."

He shook his head and walked on. It was clear that Michael had done a good job with the other cops at the precinct, letting them know that I was always interfering in his life.

There was no answer at his house. I didn't leave a message on his machine. If he'd actually told Laura about his affair, this wasn't a good sign. A number of paranoid ideas shook me, the one that kept repeating being where the wife, the kids off at school, goes insane and kills her unfaithful husband. It happens.

At the end of my shift, I got in my car and drove out there. A lone lamp lit the house, downstairs, the family room. Michael's car was gone. I went to the front door and knocked.

I could see her through the glass slat in the door. She was curled up in the corner of the couch. She wore a pair of faded pink cotton pajamas. With her short dark hair and sweet face, she could have been a college girl. The TV was on but the sound was off, and she wasn't watching it anyway. Screen colors flicked across the living room.

I knocked again. This time she looked up. I walked over to the window and waved. She got up off the couch, buttoning the top of her pajama shirt, and came to the door.

She let me in but said nothing. She went back to the couch and sat down. "You could've told me. Then this wouldn't have come as such a shock tonight."

I sat down in an armchair across from her. "It would've been just as much of a shock if *I'd* warned you."

She raised her head, closed her eyes, as if invisible rain was spattering her face. "This is so unreal." She opened her eyes, low-

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ered her head, looked at me. "In case you don't think I got hysterical, I did. There's broken glass all over the kitchen floor. The kids are at my sister's house. I didn't trust myself enough to keep them here tonight."

"Don't do anything nuts."

She shrugged. "I never do anything nuts, Chet. You know that. I'm not dramatic in any way. Or exciting. That's what he said she was. Exciting." Then: "Damn, I wish I had a cigarette."

"No, you don't. You quit five years ago. Keep it that way."

She paused. "What I hate most is my self-pity."

"You're entitled."

"I just keep thinking about all the people who have it worse than me. And here I am feeling sorry for myself."

"That never works. Believe me, I've been trying it all my life. Just because somebody's crippled or blind or has cancer doesn't help me at all."

She made a face. "We could always have sex."

"You frowned when you said that. Meaning that you know better than that."

"I have these fantasies that he walks in on me when I'm having sex with somebody and it makes him jealous and then he realizes what a good thing he's lost."

"You're in shock right now."

"That's funny you should say that. That's sort of how I feel. So shocked I don't know what to do with myself. I can't even get drunk. Two drinks and I throw up."

"You have any tranquilizers?"

"I've taken two already. This is the best they can do for me, I guess." Something changed, then. I wasn't sure what. The eyes were no longer vulnerable or sad. They reflected anger.

"I'm probably just lashing out here, Chet. But I need to say something to you, something I should've said a long time ago."

"Lash away. You'll feel better."

She took a deep breath and said, "This'll probably make you mad."

I was thinking she was going to tear into me for keeping the truth from her.

Instead, she said, "You didn't help my marriage any by constantly being on Michael's back."

My anger was swift, sure. I guess I'd been told too often in too short a time how I was doing badly by my little brother.

"I don't think that's fair, Laura."

"I just had to say it."

"Did it make you feel better?"

"Maybe. But it made you mad."

"No, it didn't."

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She smiled. "You're grinding your jaw muscles and your hands are fists. I'd say those are signs you're pretty pissed off."

"Irked, irritated, maybe. But not pissed off." Then: "I was just trying to help you kids."

"That's just it. We're not kids, Chet. We're grownups. But you'd never acknowledge that. You were always checking on him at the precinct and giving him advice on handling his money and telling him who to hang out with and who not to hang out with and—God, I remember the time when your aunt died and you told him right in front of everybody at the funeral that he shouldn't have worn a tan suit to the wake. But that was the only suit he owned, Chet. And the time you saw our girls playing Wiffle ball and you told him you thought they should be playing more feminine games. And when you got on his case about where we went to church, that it was better to go to St. Joe's because that's where the shift commander went. It just never ended, Chet."

I suppose, looking back, that's when it started, this black feeling. And that's the only way I can describe it. It was anger in such volume that I could barely breathe holding it back.

I said, "You ever hear the expression 'No good deed goes unpunished'? I used to think that was just a funny line. But it isn't. It's the truth."

"Now who's feeling sorry for himself? We're just talking here, having a conversation."

"Is that what this is, Laura, just a conversation?"

"All I meant was that you need to let him go. I hate that bitch he's in love with but even with them, Chet—you have to let them have their own lives. You can't be his father anymore." She hesitated. "He told me they're going to move away. He said he's giving notice to the commander tomorrow that he'll be leaving."

"Oh," I said, "just great." And the anger made my breathing short again. Gave me a sudden stabbing headache just above my left eye. Made every taut muscle in my body scream for release. "You know how hard I had to work to get him on the force? All the trouble he'd been in, and I had to promise that he'd straightened out and really wanted to be a cop. And now he's throwing it all away."

"It's his choice, Chet. His choice. He's a grown man. Right now I'd like to get that gun of his and empty it into his heart. And then I'd do the same to her. I hurt so much right now I don't know what to do. But it's his choice and you've got to let him make it."

"Oh, right. I get him through high school, studying with him every night so he'll get good grades. And then I get him through a couple of years of college until he starts hanging out with punks. And then I get him on the road to recovery and introduce him to you. And you're everything a man would want in a wife. And he throws it all over for some slut. And I'm supposed to like it."

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"I don't like it any more than you do, Chet. But you've got to let go now. He's in love with her and he's moving away and there's nothing we can do about it."

I stood up.

"Where're you going?"

"I'm not sure."

"I didn't mean to chase you off."

"Oh, no, of course you didn't. All the things I've done for you two over the years and this is what you say to me." I went to the front door, opened it. "You aren't chasing me away, Laura. *I'm* chasing me away."

6.

I didn't count the beers. I was careful to stay under what I considered my own legal limit, but that didn't mean I was sober.

A little bar near the old stadium. Dark, anonymous. I found myself salting my beer the way the old man had. He used to take me to the neighborhood tavern with him. Those were my favorite times, the few occasions when I got to be alone with my old man. He took Michael more places than he'd take me. But in the tavern I'd sit on the stool next to him and he'd pop peanuts in his mouth and sprinkle salt in his beer. I always wanted people to know he was a cop because I was so proud of him. But he never wore his uniform when he went drinking. He said it just caused trouble. I'd always wondered what he meant by that. If somebody gave him trouble, couldn't he just shoot him? That was how my eight-year-old mind worked. Nobody could insult cops.

But I made the mistake he'd avoided. Early on I wore my uniform into a few non-cop bars and paid for it. No fights or anything, but a couple hours of vague insults grinding into my ear canal. Everybody, especially drunks, has a good stock of anti-police stories.

I went out through the pounding rain to my car.

And that was when it happened. A lot of it was the rain. It came down in such force–it sounded like hail by then—that it hammered the metal of cars and overflowed gutters within minutes. My wipers started straining after just a few blocks. I wasn't sure where I was going. But I was in a hell of a hurry to get there.

7.

You certainly can't call this first-degree murder, my lawyer told the press the next day. *It was a terrible accident. A terrible, terrible accident. I doubt the D.A.'s even going to bring charges. You wait and see.*

I can honestly say that I wasn't even aware where I was after I left the tavern. I just instinctively took the usual way home. I for-

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got entirely that I'd be passing by her condo. I just wanted to be home, in my own bed, slipping into darkness.

She could have been anybody. I don't expect you to believe that, but it's true. Wrong time, wrong place.

They were coming from the yuppie bar across from her condo, covering their heads with newspapers they must have dragged along from inside.

And there was this person stepping into the beam of my headlights—and I was slamming on the brakes—and then there was this other figure reaching for her, jerking her back from the path of my car, but in doing so he himself stumbled and fell into the way of my skidding car and—

Daniel Ahearn, my lawyer, says to me, "You wait right here and I'm going to let her have two minutes with you."

"You going to be here, too?"

"Are you crazy? Of course I'm going to be here. But she's been calling and coming up here all day long."

"I'm afraid to see her."

"Chet, look, what happened was an honest accident, just the way you told me, right?"

He knew better and I knew better. But I had to keep repeating the story so eventually I'd believe it, too.

I'd seen her running out into the street and then I was back in that alley where I ran the killer down that time. All the misery she'd caused. Poor Laura and the kids. And ruining Michael's life after he'd tried so hard to be trustworthy and sober again and—

But then Michael had suddenly pulled her back and tripped in front of my car and by then I couldn't stop and the sound he made when the car hit him—I knew he was dead; I knew he was dead.

"So she's going to come in here and go all hysterical on you and accuse you of being a murderer and tell you you're going to the gas chamber. But you're going to do what?"

"I'm just going to sit here and calmly tell her that I'm sorry. That it really was an accident. That it was just this terrible coincidence that I happened to be driving by that night."

"And that's when I say, 'I hate to put it this way, Jane, but his loss is as big as yours, wouldn't you say? He accidentally killed his own brother.' So, you ready?"

"I'm ready."

"Remember, just keep taking a lot of good long breaths to keep yourself cool."

I took a good long breath.

"That's right," he said, "just like that."

He patted me on the shoulder and then he went through the door to the reception area.

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She was already screaming and sobbing when he brought her in.

She stood in front of me like an interrogator. She didn't talk. Between sobs, she shouted. "You think you're going to get away with this, don't you, Chet? Well, you're not. Not when the D.A. gets all the witnesses lined up. Even his wife's going to testify against you, you know that, Chet? Do you know that? As much as she hates me, she's going to testify against you!"

And that was when she slapped me. I couldn't tell if it was skill or luck but I sure felt it.

She touched her stomach. "Thanks to you, your brother's baby won't have a father. Maybe you'll think about that when you're in prison, Chet. His poor little kid without a father." She started crying again. "This was supposed to be so good, so happy for the three of us. But you couldn't let that happen, could you, Chet? You had to make sure your little brother did just what you wanted him to, didn't you? So you killed him! Your own brother! You killed him!"

She spit at me. It covered my nose and immediately dripped down to my upper lip. My lawyer stepped in then and started dragging her to the door. She was still screaming in the outer office. I imagine the wealthy clients sitting in the reception room were wondering what was going on.

When he came back and closed the door, he said, "That is one nasty bitch."

"She said my sister-in-law's going to testify against me."

He waved me off. "She doesn't know what she's talking about, Chet. You think she wants her kids to hear about what kind of man your brother was?"

"How about bond?"

"Just what I predicted. Judge said no bond. You're on your own recognizance. I brought along all your awards and commendations. Nobody thinks you ran Michael down on purpose. It was raining and dark and he just stepped too far out into the street. His blood alcohol was way over the limit. I'm not arrogant enough to call this a slam-dunk. No serious criminal case is. But I can practically guarantee you you'll never see prison. You'll be free."

That was the word that was supposed to make me feel better. Free. I kept thinking about it all the way home and all the way through our quiet dinner and even when we were in bed and when I couldn't respond to Jen as I usually do.

Free. But I knew better than that now, didn't I? ●

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Art by Ron Bucalo

IVORY CROSSROADS

by James Powell

As a young man in the 1840s, Ambrose Ganelon, founder of San Sebastiano's famous detective agency, had witnessed the rage for elephant-foot wastepaper baskets and umbrella depositories, when every European gentleman wanted the first of those whimsical furnishings for his den and the second for his front hallway. At the time scrupulous Arab traders added to the slaughter of the animals by rejecting all but the right front foot, the same foot the Moslem used to enter the mosque, considering the others unclean. Thus was born the critical African ivory shortage of 1868.

In that year, Ganelon kept a careful eye on the dwindling ivory supply. Of late, the wealth of his archrival the evil Dr. Ludwig Fong centered on his many European billiard parlors, smoky dens where crimes were planned and stolen goods disposed of, and on his mah-jongg parlors, where ladies of fashion gambled, puffed on opium pipes, and gossiped, providing ample fodder for Fong's thriving blackmail enterprises. Every click of a billiard ball or a mah-jongg tile, some said, meant a groschen in the Eurasian master criminal's pocket.

As the ivory shortage grew, Ganelon began circulating stories about the fabled ivory towers of Timbuktu, that center of African

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Arabic learning. Fong took the bait, and he and his lieutenants left Berlin and set out for the Dark Continent, where they raised a heavily armed band of men and a caravan of ox carts, meaning to loot the city of its ivory.

With Fong away, Ganelon, an amateur oboist of the first rank, had time to visit the Polyhymnia Club, where the music lovers of the principality met to read *Vox Humana* and other musical periodicals and discuss their avocation. There he found his old friend from university days, Max LeGrand, maker of fine pianos for the concert stage. In better times, LeGrand and Fong had been rivals in the purchasing of African ivory. LeGrand prized it for its density and whiteness and would use no other for his piano keys. The recent ivory shortage had compelled him to close his atelier and put his workers on half pay.

"I had a bit of luck researching this one," James Powell told us. "I discovered there was a narrow-gauge railroad through the Mt. Cenis Pass from 1868 to 1871, when it was destroyed. I suspect it was used to bring up men and equipment for the job of digging the tunnel through Mt. Cenis. But it seemed as if it was put there just for my story."

Soon Ganelon and his friend were visiting the theater and musical entertainments together. (Since the arrival of their son ten years before, Madame Ganelon seldom ventured abroad.) The two friends made an interesting couple, for Ganelon was short, stout, and taciturn while LeGrand was thin, above average height, and given to rhetorical turns.

That September, they attended a concert given by Glendening Gunderson, the British North American Alpine tusk-horn prodigy. His unusual musical instrument was an elephant tusk drilled from end to end and fitted with a reed mouthpiece and finger holes. The thick curve of the tusk, the bell end, rested on the concert stage while the artist stood on a folding chair with his back to the audience and blew into the other. In Gunderson's hands the Alpine tusk-horn sounded like a vast piano. That night he brought the astonished audience to its feet with his performance of J. S. Bach's "Goldberg Variations."

Later Ganelon and LeGrand sat in their seats waiting for the aisle to clear, a process that took much longer since the introduction of the hoop skirt. (Someone had recently commented that whatever disguise the Devil took in the Garden of Eden, to tempt today's fashionable women he'd better come as a hoop snake.) While they waited, Ganelon remarked that he'd heard Alpine tusk-horns before, but Gunderson's instrument possessed an extraordinary vibrato, as if each note was echoing back and forth between the walls of a small Alpine valley.

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LeGrand caught his meaning. "What a glorious day for classical music," he remarked, "if the legendary elephant graveyard in the Alps really did exist and we were the ones to find it!"

The story goes that when Hannibal the Carthaginian general crossed the Alps with his elephants in 218 B.C., his favorite animal, whom he had named the Big Barcelona after his father Hamilcar Barca, took a misstep on the mountain pass and fell to his death in a remote valley. Sad, but with a war to fight against the Romans Hannibal hurried on. But as the other elephants passed by they looked up at the stars as if marking the place.

Now the Big Barcelona, a patriarch among elephants, had many offspring, including an old Tarmac who had pulled the very Roman harrow used to salt defeated Carthage's ground so nothing would ever grow there again. One day Tarmac smelled a ghost of edelweiss on the wind and knew he would soon die. There and then, he set out for the Alpine valley that held Big Barcelona's grave. Tarmac dog-paddled the Hellespont, crossed Turkey, Greece, northern Italy, and down to the French Riviera. When he reached the valley of the Rhone River he turned northward and entered the Alps by the Little St. Bernard Pass. Following Hannibal's route, Tarmac found the Big Barcelona's valley, lay himself down beside his grandsire's bones, and died.

For the next few centuries elephant sightings along the Rhone were common. People called them Hannibal's strays and after the fall of the Roman Empire they viewed the animals kindly, as relics of a happier time. Later the elephants added their ponderous gray to the Dark Ages. Then the simple folk called them dragon caterpillars, believing they headed up into the mountains to weave cocoons and burst forth as flying dragons to rule the Alpine sky. By the Enlightenment, Big Barcelona's bloodline had thinned and the elephants came no more.

After the concert, a small reception was held for Gunderson at the Polyhymnia. The musician brought his instrument, which he'd found in an old shop dealing in musical curiosities while attending the conservatorium in Leipzig on the Mendelssohn Scholarship.

When Ganelon examined the tusk-horn at close hand he found a small silver plate on the bell end that read: "Made by Hans Lemke of Geneva. 1842. A genuine *Alpine* tusk-horn. Accept no substitutes." The italics added an intriguing emphasis.

Among the other club members present that evening was Cornelius O'Hagen, a craggy-faced Ulsterman who played cello in the San Sebastiano Symphony. An Alpine mountain-climbing enthusiast, in 1859 O'Hagen had lost a leg above the knee to frostbite trying to ascend the then unconquered Schreckhorn. "They gave me a cork leg," he once told Ganelon in mock indignation. "Cork, and me a dues-paying Ulsterman. Why not a Belfast leg?" O'Hagen lived

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at the Polyhymnia in a room crowded with papier-mâché models of the mountains he'd tried to climb. O'Hagen once dared to tell the short-tempered detective-oboist that he pitied woodwind players who have never breathed in noble mountain air and had to make do with tired stuff that had already passed through a million lungs.

Hans Lemke? Ganelon returned home to the rue Blondin convinced he had heard the Alpine tusk-horn maker's name before and in an elephant-graveyard context. On the stairs to the family living quarters he passed the small closet on the landing which his young son and namesake had turned into a scientific laboratory, making the hallway reek of rotten eggs.

Entering his library he took down from the shelf *Swiss Eccentrics and Eccentricities,* a recent acquisition. Some day Ganelon thought he might write a similar work about San Sebastiano's many colorful citizens, suspecting that if he left the job to someone else, his own name would lead the list of eccentrics.

When he turned to the chapter entitled "The Man Who Believed in the Elephant Graveyard in the Alps" Ganelon read, "In the second quarter of this century Hans Lemke, a musical-instrument maker of Geneva, allowed himself to be the victim of an absurd swindle. Lemke, who specialized in the making of Alpine horns from ivory, was working late in his shop when he heard a wheel grind to a halt on the cobbles outside his door. Then came a knock. He lay aside his auger, brushed the curls of ivory from his lap, and found a large man in mountaineer's dress with his face concealed in an ample cloak. The man, who said his name was Otto Bauer, asked if Lemke was interested in buying an elephant tusk. Yes, came the reply, if it was African ivory, for Lemke deemed Indian ivory only good for making combs and letter openers. The man uncovered a large tusk on the wheelbarrow behind him, carried it into the shop, and put it down by the stove as Lemke directed. As they waited for the ivory to come to room temperature so Lemke could test its tone, he asked where the man had found it.

"Bauer said he worked with the mountain-climbing parties, where his job was to carry piggyback English tourists unable or unwilling to make the ascent on foot. Once his party was caught in a sudden and unseasonable snowstorm. When his cargo dismounted to huddle with the others around a fire beneath a hastily erected canvas shelter, Bauer moved off a bit to answer the call of nature and in the evening gloom he set his foot wrong and fell off the narrow path, tumbling several hundred feet down a steep, snow-covered mountainside.

"Miraculously, he survived the fall uninjured and in the dying light slid right into what he thought was a pile of underbrush on the valley floor. But the sound his crash made was like a large man sitting down on the keyboard of a piano. Bauer's ears told

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him he had stumbled on every mountaineer's dream, the fabled Alpine graveyard where the descendants of Hannibal's favorite elephant returned to die.

"When the other guides missed Bauer, it was dark and there was nothing they could do until daylight. By then the man had decided he wasn't going to share his find with anyone. At dawn, when they shouted down to see if he was still alive, Bauer made no answer. So his companions left him for dead.

"When the ivory had warmed, Lemke lay an ear to the tusk and rapped it with his knuckle. The sound told him it was the finest of African ivory and he bought the tusk on the spot. Could Bauer bring him more? Bauer could. But he was a secretive man, coming at night and never entering if a customer was in the shop. A few times he brought his son Conrad, a young mountaineer with a twisted back and his left shoulder higher than the other. Bauer even showed Lemke something wrapped in oilskin, claiming it was the map to the elephant graveyard.

"One day the son Conrad arrived at Lemke's shop alone bringing a tusk he said would be the last. While passing the ivory to him across a crevasse on the Miage Glacier beneath Mont Blanc, the elder Bauer had slipped and fallen to his death deep inside the glacier. After expressing his regret, Lemke asked if Conrad couldn't continue his father's work. But Conrad admitted he'd never been to the elephant graveyard. He said his father always made him wait up there on the Miage, a place the elder Bauer liked because he could see if he was being followed. When his father returned with a tusk, it was Conrad's job to carry it back to Geneva. When Lemke asked about the map, Conrad shook his head. He knew nothing about any map.

"So with his supply of what he thought was Alpine ivory at an end, Lemke retired from business rather than work with a lesser material."

The author of *Swiss Eccentrics and Eccentricities* ended the chapter with this explanation: "Clearly the gullible instrument maker had been taken in by a thief and confidence man. Bauer probably worked as a strongman in one of the several Geneva-based circuses. Traditionally, circus owners hid away the tusks of their dead elephants as a kind of retirement fund. Bauer must have stolen his employer's cache and concocted the elephant graveyard story to explain how he'd come by the ivory. His swindle had two parts. He would sell Lemke the stolen tusks. Then he would announce he was retiring from the strenuous business and offer to sell Lemke the fraudulent map.

"Now Conrad, a partner in the original theft of the tusks, began to suspect his father meant to abscond with their money once Lemke bought the last one. So the son turned the tables on his father and robbed and killed him and disposed of his body. Then

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he sold Lemke the remaining tusk and fled the city."

Ganelon closed the book. The author's explanation might have convinced him if he hadn't heard the wonderful mountain echo in Glendening Gunderson's Alpine tusk-horn. What if Bauer's story was true? And if the father's, why not the son's?

As luck would have it, Ganelon's man in Geneva was sick in bed with eavesdropsy, a common affliction among detectives. Early medicine attributed the disease to a parasite of the earwig family that infested thatched roofs beneath whose eaves the detectives stood to listen at windows. Today science holds the ailment comes from the bite of the bitter dust mites that thrive on the surfaces of window glass.

So Ganelon would have to go to Geneva himself. But he could try to save time by first paying a visit to O'Hagen at the Polyhymnia. The Ulsterman greeted him warmly and moved the model of the Schreckhorn from its place of honor across the arms of the room's other chair so that the detective could sit down.

When Ganelon asked about the Miage Glacier, O'Hagen seemed amused. "Well, I never imagined you interested in mountain climbing," he said. "We climbers hold that when a man's circumference bears more than a certain ratio to his altitude he prefers his country flat."

Ganelon fought back a sharp reply and waited while O'Hagen dragged a model of Mont Blanc from under his bed. Sitting there with the mountain in his lap, the man used a caliper which he swung up the mountain like a stiff-legged stick figure while he described the path he'd taken to reach the peak. Then he swung the caliper down to the Miage glacier on the mountain's eastern slope and looked at Ganelon.

The detective asked how long it would take a body fallen into a crevasse twenty-five years ago to emerge from the glacier, knowing O'Hagen's answer could only be approximate since Ganelon did not know the exact location of the crevasse on the ice.

O'Hagen worked with a protractor, his calipers, and a pencil and paper for a few minutes. Then he announced that either the body had already emerged or would do so in the next five years or so. Then, setting the model aside, he crossed to the window and, standing with his back to the room, he began to outline the four principal theories of glacial movement beginning with James David Forbes's viscous theory, which declares a glacier to be an imperfect fluid or viscous body which is urged down the slopes of a certain inclination by the mutual pressure of its parts.

Ganelon made his quiet escape from O'Hagen's room amid this torrent of words. Downstairs in the club lobby he ran into LeGrand. The piano maker grew excited when Ganelon told him he now believed the Alpine elephant graveyard actually existed.

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Laying his hand on Ganelon's arm, LeGrand insisted, "Then you must find it before Dr. Ludwig Fong does. My fortune is at your disposal in all this. Ambrose, Europe stands at a crossroads. Will we choose the road to sublimity or to degradation, the road to the concert hall or to the pool hall?"

Out on the street again, with LeGrand's rhetoric still ringing in his ears, Ganelon turned back for a moment and there at an upper window of the Polyhymnia was O'Hagen, arms waving, still in full monologue. Ganelon tipped his hat but was not sure he caught the Ulsterman's attention.

In the late eighteenth century, under the influence of Goethe's romantic novel *The Sorrows of Werther,* Europe's young people turned gloomy and suicidal in the face of unrequited love. Among the economical, death by throwing oneself into glacial crevasses became popular for it saved families the expense of funerals and cemetery plots.

The Biblical injunction to bury the dead inspired some devout Protestant laymen to form a community to deal with suicides and those who died on the ice by accident. People called them the Weir Brotherhood because they built traps beneath the glaciers to catch emerging bodies. They also provided small chapels and churchyards for the dead. The Brotherhood had an establishment beneath the Miage Glacier beside a rushing stream that was one of the sources of the Isère River.

The talking head of a young gravedigger hard at work in the churchyard directed Ganelon to a side door of the chapel where he found the Weir Brother in charge, a large-nosed man who gave him that half-interested look those preoccupied with the dead save for the living. "Yes," he said, consulting a ledger, "we recovered the body of an Otto Bauer on the seventeenth of August two years ago. We seldom know the names of our charges. But I found his written on a map wrapped in oilskin and sewn into the jacket lining. If you have proof you are a relative I will turn his belongings over to you."

Admitting he had no such proof, Ganelon asked if he might at least have a look at the map of which the man spoke. The Brother gave a sniff, consulted his ledger again, and led the way down into the chapel cellar. Behind a counter stood a wall of shelves holding numbered cardboard boxes. He took one down and dumped its contents—several copper coins, a short-stemmed clay pipe, and a pocketknife—onto the counter.

He stuck his nose back into the box. "Strange," he said. "The map is gone." He grew thoughtful. "And now I recall something odd. The day after we found the body, Old Schmidt, our sexton and gravedigger who had worked for us for twenty-five years, vanished without a word, leaving behind a month's wages due to him."

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Raising his left shoulder, Ganelon ventured, "Conrad Schmidt from Geneva?"

Traveling on by carriage, Ganelon pondered this new development. Conrad Bauer had spent twenty-five years waiting for his father's body. Two years ago he had recovered the map. But no new supply of ivory had appeared on the market. Why was that? Ganelon thought he knew. When he reached Geneva he telegraphed LeGrand to join him there at the Bristol Hotel.

Early the next morning, the detective went to the Geneva Prefecture, whose people were under some obligation to him for recent help he had rendered the Swiss police.

"Here is the man who will know if your Conrad Bauer is in Geneva," said the prefect, introducing Ganelon to a broken-nosed, plain-clothed policeman with a slouch and well-scuffed shoes. Then, as he turned to leave them together, the prefect added words that gave fresh urgency to Ganelon's mission. "I assume you've heard that Dr. Fong has returned to Berlin wounded in the arm by a Tuareg blade."

Ganelon's policeman guide was long of limb and jaw and wore a goatee. He winked at the detective as they left the prefecture and said, "Here in Geneva we have men who walk about all day with sticks with pins on them to collect cigar ends and cigarette butts which they take to a certain man who buys them for a few sou. He grinds them up in a mull—you know, a snuff-grinder—and sells the tobacco powder to people who sprinkle it around their garden plants to ward off pests.

"Other people walk about all day with their eyes and ears wide open, then come to me when they've something to sell. I put it all in my mull." He tapped his head and pulled on his beard. "And I grind it up."

Ganelon smiled, for most snuff mulls were shaped like a ram's head.

"Awhile back," continued the policeman, "an old man asked if I knew Conrad Bauer was back in Geneva. Now, years ago, this Bauer fled the city before the police could question him about his father's disappearance. Before I paid my informant I had him point this Bauer out to me. I've kept my eye on him ever since. I think I can tell you where he's been."

"Please do," said Ganelon.

"Doing a long stretch in prison. Oh, I've seen it before, an ex-convict returns to the old neighborhood and his old life of crime. But his underworld connections are long dead. The living, the young criminals, don't know or trust him."

Ganelon couldn't correct the policeman. The fewer people who knew about the map the better. But his description of Bauer's situation wasn't that far wrong.

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The policeman led him to where two narrow streets intersected at a small fountain. Several old men sat around the edge of the fountain. Off from the others was one whose left shoulder was higher than its mate.

"Thank you," Ganelon told the policeman. "Your superiors will learn how helpful you have been."

Then he went over and sat down beside the old man. "Conrad Bauer, is it not?"

The man cocked his right eyebrow as high as his left shoulder. After a long moment he asked, "And if it is?"

"You have a certain map," said Ganelon. "One you cannot use." The man opened his mouth to protest. But Ganelon continued. "If I know about the map, others more dangerous than I will find out about it, too. So listen. You are not a young man anymore. You cannot remove the ivory from the valley by yourself. You would need a team. But you're your father's son and have inherited his deep distrust of others."

After another long moment the old man said, "I didn't murder my father, you know. The snow bridge across the crevasse gave way from the weight of the ivory. As he felt it go he handed the tusk to me. I took it when I should have grabbed his arm. In an instant he had vanished from sight."

Conrad Bauer looked away. "All those years working for the Weir Brotherhood while Father's body dawdled inside the glacier," he said, shaking his head. "He might have hurried himself along. And so might you have, sir. Yes, I see now that my only choice was to wait until an honorable person like yourself came along to offer a fair price for the map."

That same afternoon LeGrand, fresh from the train, signed a document in the presence of a notary and witnessed by Ganelon agreeing to pay Bauer a quarterly sum for the rest of his natural life provided his map proved true.

Ganelon and LeGrand had a carriage waiting at the door to take them from the city. They stopped that night just short of the Little St. Bernard Pass. The next morning they traveled up into the mountains on the road Napoleon built in the 1800s leading all the way to the Mt. Cenis Pass down through which Hannibal was said to have entered Italy.

In midafternoon they stopped their carriage and struck out on foot through the cold mountain air the three kilometers to the valley marked on the map. Its steep slopes of dark rock and snow were decked round with snowy overhangs. Standing there on the rim, Ganelon used his three-pull pocket telescope to examine the valley floor. In one corner the wind had blown the snow from the rock. He passed the telescope to LeGrand, who looked and nodded. Yes, they had found the legendary elephant graveyard.

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Their carriage now set off for the Auberge de L'Aiglon, a hotel on the slope of Mt. Cenis some fifteen kilometers away. It would be their command center.

On the way LeGrand said, "We will use the Right-Headed League." This alliance of top-lofty organizations sought the improvement of the human race, some, like the Polyhymnia Club, by promoting classical music; others through physical fitness; others by church work, whether by distributing tracts or forming soup societies to feed the needy. The league's leadership had recently pledged to work in concert whenever the need arose.

Ganelon had never taken sides in the great debate over whether making people happy would make them good, or making them good would make them happy. But he knew the more people involved, the more chance Fong, who had eyes and ears everywhere, would find out about it. So he insisted that the Right-Headed League's people must converge on the site simultaneously and all the ivory must be extracted and transported away in a single day.

When they reached the hotel they set telegraph wires humming across Europe.

The night before the recovery operation Ganelon and his companion went to bed early for they had to rise by dawn to oversee the moving of the ivory.

But just before midnight a caravan of diligences arrived at the hotel, disgorging a horde of noisy men and women guests who took up quarters on the floor above them and shouted and sang drunkenly into the early morning.

The last time the revels woke Ganelon he heard a small carriage stop beneath his window. After a few minutes a door slammed above him, then another and then another. The noise diminished with each slam until the floor above was totally silent. The hair on the back of Ganelon's head stirred. Something told him that he and Ludwig Fong, his archrival, were staying at the same hotel.

Ganelon and LeGrand, deep in woolly capes smelling strongly of sheep and shepherds, stood on the valley rim in the early morning chill as contingents of the Right-Headed League arrived: Here the young men of the Mens Sana in Corpore Sano Verein in lederhosen singing songs of wandering which they could not bring down into the valley with them for fear of triggering avalanches; there a seminary rifle club called Sharpshooters for Peace, whom Ganelon assigned to lookout posts and to guard the ivory when it was brought out of the valley; next the Excelsior Society, mountain climbers for a better world. Now came the sturdy nuns from the nearby Convent of Saint Goliath, who rescued snowbound travelers from the mountain slopes in winter. After them strode the soup-society ladies dressed in skirted bloomers, warm gloves, and

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hats and climbing sticks. Manhandling sacks of onions and potatoes and sides of mutton for their nourishing soup kettles made these ladies well fitted for the work at hand.

A rope was doled out to the valley floor. Then began the job of collecting the tusks and passing them up from shoulder to shoulder to the valley rim. There they were loaded onto the sleighs of Les Amis du Saint Bonhomme-de-Neige, The Friends of Saint Snowman, French Canadian teamsters in gray homespun and bright toques and sashes who happened to be in Europe for the Tour de Suisse sleigh races. Their conveyances would take the ivory over to the recently built light railroad through the Mt. Cenis Pass and down to Italian trains for transportation to San Sebastiano.

By midmorning the work was done. Just as a sleigh sped away with the last of the ivory, the wigwag semaphore from the Sharpshooters' lookout sprang to life. Ganelon took out his telescope. Coming over the rim on the other side of the valley he saw a strange column of people. The men came first, overweight, stoop-shouldered, pigeon-chested, with unhealthy, indoor faces, blinking in the glare off the snow. He watched as they slid and stumbled down in striped and checked trousers, narrow shoes, and tight jackets unequal to the weather: pimps, cat's-paws, cut-purses, and pool sharks marching to the noise of their own barking coughs and phlegmatic wheezing. Next came their female counterparts beneath the Heart-of-Gold banner of the Sisterhood of the Ladies of the Night, all powdered and rouged in their soiled finery and bright, impractical parasols.

Turning his telescope back to the top of the valley, Ganelon saw Fong himself dressed in furs with one arm in a black sling, his free hand holding a riding crop, frowning down on this ragtag collection of late risers, the best he could put together at a moment's notice to race the Right-Headed League to the elephant graveyard.

Suddenly a loud fit of coughing rose up from Fong's men and echoed across the valley. A moment later a large shelf of snow above them broke off from the main and came crashing down, engulfing the front of the column.

The women in the rear immediately turned around and started back up to the top of the valley where Fong stood, raging and threatening them with his riding crop. But the women furled their parasols and gripped them firmly as they came within striking distance. Daunted, Fong stood aside.

Then the arch-villain looked over sharply, as if feeling the weight of the telescope's gaze. When he saw Ganelon, his face went white with rage. To Ganelon, Fong always looked his most German when angry. But now as he watched he saw the villain's expression turn abruptly Oriental. Ganelon knew Fong was scheming something. He wondered what.

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Back in San Sebastiano, with LeGrand's piano atelier humming again, Ganelon returned to pondering cases during long walks, "constitutionals" as the English were starting to call them. Not long afterwards he received by special messenger an ebony walking stick with a golden five-fanged dragon's-claw pommel. The shaft of the stick concealed a two-foot sword blade of Damascus steel. In the accompanying note Ludwig Fong urged him to accept the gift. "Now that you are moving abroad again, I fear someone may succeed in an attack on your life before I can make time in my busy schedule to kill you myself."

Smiling, Ganelon decided yes, he'd use the walking stick. It was a handsome piece. And the dragon's claw, Fong's emblem, would focus his mind on his rival.

One afternoon later that week, Ganelon decided to buy a newspaper and sit on a particular bench in the cliff-side Parc Belvedere above the Mediterranean, whose blue, local legends say, was so beautiful the very sky stole it for its own. In the newspaper he happened on an account of Swiss missionaries in German East Africa who were trekking to a new parish. As they passed a herd of elephants their cart hit a pothole, causing a cuckoo clock among their belongings to strike the hour. This alien sound so startled the elephants that they stampeded northward out of sight.

As he smiled at the story Ganelon noticed a bent-over man as gray as an apparition coming up the path toward him. Reaching Ganelon's bench, the man stopped and introduced himself. "Mr. Ganelon, my name is Leander Crisp," he said, presenting a visiting card which described him as a "Jocular Archaeologist."

Now Ganelon placed the man. Crisp was the author of a book called *Chuckling Down Memory Lane: Knee-Slapping Jokes and Riddles From Our Grandsires' Day* that had been severely handled by reviewers. For his part, Ganelon saw little point in rooting around in the slagheap of old jokes. Only the fittest of such things survive. Whatever has not come down to us, ought not come down to us.

Mr. Crisp took a seat beside him and said, "You are a solver of riddles, I believe, sir. Here is one you should enjoy: Why is the city of Rome like a candlewick?"

"Like a—"

"Like a candlewick. The city of Rome," repeated Crisp, waiting. Then he stood up. "Perhaps you need time to consider my little riddle. Let us meet here again."

After the man had gone, Ganelon sat there on the bench for some time, puzzling over the riddle. Then he walked home shaking his head, embarrassed that he, the great detective, didn't know the answer.

That evening at dinner when Madame commented on his lack of appetite he told her, "Here's a riddle for you. Why is the city of Rome like a candlewick?" She thought for a moment before start-

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ing to clear the table.

Later Ganelon played his oboe for several hours, something he only did when trying to solve a most difficult case. But he went to bed that evening and tossed and turned, the riddle unsolved.

Early the next morning Ganelon went directly to the park bench, hoping Crisp might reappear. By noon the sky turned gray and a light rain began to fall. Ganelon stayed until the rain grew brisker. He returned home sopping wet, unsure what he hated most, Crisp, the city of Rome, or candlewicks.

After another bad night, he woke feeling he was coming down with a cold. Nevertheless, he made his way back to the park bench, ready to admit that the damned puzzle had him stumped and to have Crisp tell him the answer.

Near eleven in the morning, Ganelon saw Crisp coming up the path and his heart quickened. The archaeologist of the jocular seemed pleased with himself as he approached Ganelon, who sat with his walking stick between his legs.

"All right," said the detective. "Why is the damn city of Rome like a damn candlewick?"

Crisp beamed triumphantly. "Because it's in the middle of grease," he said.

Ganelon blinked. Then he understood and shouted, "But Rome isn't in the middle of Greece. It's in the middle of Italy!"

Crisp's pitying look threw Ganelon into a rage. He realized all the time he'd wasted over this geographic ignoramus's silly riddle. Suddenly he heard a click. Looking down, he saw he'd released the button on the sword cane and drawn the blade six inches out of its scabbard. In horror, he slammed the sword cane shut again.

The noise brought two plain-clothed policemen rushing out from behind some nearby trees. As they grabbed the protesting Crisp, one of them told Ganelon, "Sir, we were alerted this morning by telegram from Berlin that this man intended to murder you."

"You were misinformed," Ganelon replied. "He was to be the murder victim and you the witnesses. Escort him to the border and let him go." Then, as the policemen marched Crisp away Ganelon shouted after them, "But if he tries to tell you a riddle along the way, feel free to shoot him down like a dog."

When he was alone, Ganelon crossed the park and stood at the cliff's edge shaking his head. A moment ago he had almost killed a man. Now he knew what his archenemy had been scheming back up there in the Alps. Fong wanted to make Ganelon a murderer, to make the two of them brothers in spirit. And he had almost succeeded.

Cursing his own frailty, his face burning with humiliation, Ganelon grabbed the sword cane by its ferrule end, swung it around, and threw it out into the air as far as he could. Then he watched as it fell into the blue water below. ●

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The Old Wife's Tale

by Gillian Roberts

I cry at weddings. All weddings, even for people I don't know. Even for weddings I don't attend.

Even for weddings that haven't happened yet.

Opening the paper and looking at the list of people applying for marriage licenses is enough to start the waterworks.

In a world this evil, with so many people doing such terrible things to each other, the idea of two people innocently and with all their hearts and souls promising to be true to one another forever, till death parts them—I mean, how can a person not weep at the pure beauty of that?

But also, how can we not weep in a different sort of way, knowing the dangers ahead, the serious difference between a wedding and a marriage?

The poor brides and grooms are like innocent and idealistic recruits being sent to battle by seasoned warriors who know the odds are stacked against them. That, in fact, they're doomed.

George—George Edward Alexander, a man of three first names—and I made our death-do-us-part vows years ago. Even thinking about that day makes my eyes tear, but not completely with joy. George is the love of my life. He always was, he still is, and he always will be. I've made sure of that. Love is not the problem.

Marriage is.

The vows are strong. If only men were too. Consider yourself as modern as you like, but I say some things don't change. I am a liberated woman, a woman of her times, but I can be any kind of woman I decide to be and George will still be a man, and there's pretty much only one kind of that.

That's another reason I cry.

Gillian Roberts won the Anthony Award for Best First Mystery in 1988 for her novel *Caught Dead in Philadelphia,* and in the years since has written a dozen more delightful, witty mysteries at novel-length. Formerly an English teacher in Philadelphia, Ms. Roberts now lives in California. Her latest book, released in January of 2007 by Ballantine, is *All's Well That Ends.* †

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Things were okay the first three years, when George was in law school. Maybe not entirely okay, but like they say, the wife is always the last to know, and ignorance was bliss. We were a team, both of us working hard for the sake of our future, of our marriage. I abandoned my dreams of the stage—too risky when we desperately needed funds. Instead, I taught elementary school art. I was a traveling "specialist," which meant I drove all over the district to scrape out a living. By the end of the day, I didn't have the energy to wonder if George actually needed to burn as much midnight oil elsewhere as he did.

Besides, classmates could help him in ways I couldn't, so he studied with them, late into the night. It wasn't completely his fault if some of them were attractive.

And the studying was worth it, because George became a brilliant attorney, ask anybody. Say his name and you'll hear nothing but lavish praise for his skill. Okay, maybe you shouldn't ask just anybody. Maybe he's not universally adored, but who is? His specialty is one that most lawyers don't want to touch—criminal law. And he's so clever, his nickname is "Loop-de-loop" for all the legal holes he finds. Some people say it's really *"loup,"* French for wolf, but they're wrong.

I appreciate the idea that everybody is entitled to a fair trial even if it seems that maybe sometimes the trials aren't all that fair. Odd things happen. People on the other side from George—that is, people on the wrong side—change their mind, forget what they said, disappear, but George says it is all in the name of justice. I say justice is sometimes really, really blind, not to mention deaf and brain-dead.

I wish he'd upgrade his criminals to the ones in corporations. George laughs when I say that. He says it's part of my being a good housekeeper—I like things to be in order: neat, clean, and tidy. He says I like white-collar crime because it sounds as if it's been laundered. George is famous for his sense of humor.

George says you make your living however you can, and since he isn't murdering people, and he isn't committing the crimes, he doesn't get to choose what kind of person he represents. He takes whoever needs him.

And thanks to those thugs and killers (those *accused* thugs and killers) and George's legal skills, I long ago stopped driving from school to school, smiling at dumb dried-noodle collages and pathetic drawings. Thanks to a lot of (alleged) murderers and rapists, we live well beyond anything I ever imagined. Our children had every advantage, and now both are in college, and I am understandably proud of the job I did in raising them. I say *I* raised them because, in truth, George wasn't around much.

The last to know, that's what they say. I believed him when he had those late meetings, even though most of his clients were

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behind bars, and prisons don't keep the same hours as cocktail lounges. But, like he said, I wasn't a lawyer and I didn't understand.

It was a long time before I put two and two together and knew that George was usually one of the two.

The first time it dawned on me that maybe George wasn't telling the complete truth about his whereabouts and with-whomabouts, I took it slow. I am not a lawyer, true, but I'd watched how George built up a case. I knew it would be stupid to make accusations I couldn't back up, to appear weak or ill-informed. Instead, I observed, and I collected data, and then we had it out. Actually, it wasn't angry like that sounds. I merely pointed out the fact that his activities were endangering the sacred vows of marriage, and he was in danger of losing me and his children.

I didn't have to say that he was also in danger of losing half of every penny he'd ever made and everything he owned. He knew that part himself.

George cried. He said she meant nothing. He said he was weak—as if I needed to be informed of that—and he said it was over. He said he loved me now and forever. He bought me a diamond wedding band with eighteen square-cut diamonds ringing my finger.

He said it would never happen again.

It happened again.

He bought me a Jaguar convertible.

And again.

He bought me diamond earrings. Large diamond earrings.

A second home.

A bleached gold mink full-length coat.

A new, enormous house in the best neighborhood.

I wasn't thrilled with the status quo, but the all-important thing was that the marriage remained intact, even if the particulars weren't exactly what the wedding vows had in mind. It was obvious that those women didn't matter to him in any big way. That didn't mean I didn't keep watching and making notes—and telling him about what I knew—but we'd reached something like a silent agreement. In fact, after a while, I didn't have to tell him a thing. I'd just maybe sigh, or be in a mood, and just like that there'd be another fabulous gift, and I knew another one of them had bit the dust.

It was almost as if George wanted to play around—and wanted to be caught. Wanted to have an excuse to end the game, to toss away the woman of the hour.

That was how it was and how I thought it would be forever, or as long as George could manage it. But that was before Lili Beth Warsaw. Not that I knew her name at that point, but I knew

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there'd been a frightening change in George. He stopped being sloppy about his whereabouts. He stopped leaving suspicious matchbooks around, never came home late enough to start me going, didn't have cryptic initials (R—3 P.M.) in his Palm Pilot. His clothing was never stained with lipstick, nor did it smell of another woman's perfume. He came to the kids' school events. In short, he behaved like an upstanding, marriage-vow-honoring, faithful man.

I knew it for what it was: upgraded cheating. Serious cheating. Don't-want-to-be-caught cheating.

I had always been vigilant, but now I had to become even more so. Quietly, I tracked his whereabouts and schedule, his times, his computers and calendars, and most of all, I watched and listened for careful lies of omission, overly detailed explanations of absences, all the careful "proofs" of where he was and when.

It wasn't easy. He was hiding this one, because with this one, he didn't want me to cry foul and end his fun. He wanted to keep on playing with her for keeps—which would mean I'd be retired from the game.

What he wasn't remembering was that I'd vowed to be with him until death—not Lili Beth Warsaw—did part us.

His sudden interest in real estate clinched it. We'd lived in the house that guilt bought for only two years. I'd shopped for it solo—George wasn't interested in houses then. He'd said, "Just tell me the new address so I'll drive to the right house after work."

It wasn't like George to be so obvious and so stupid, but of course, the man wasn't thinking with his brain, so one Sunday, he looked up from the papers. "This house is going to be too big for us when the kids go to college," he said.

"That isn't for years," I answered.

"No harm thinking ahead, is there? I heard about a good-sounding house, smaller, pretty, and it's open today. I think I'll take a look. Get a feel for what's ahead."

Pathetic, isn't it? A grown man acting like a junior-high-school kid who needs to see the love-object, and needs to announce it with an unnecessary cover story. I almost felt sorry for him.

"You're right," I said. "Good idea. Hold on and I'll get my coat."

He looked surprised, then he looked pained. "No," he said. "I changed my mind. You're right. It won't be for years. Silly to—"

"Fine," I said. "You stay here. I'm going. I want to see what you think is perfect." That last part was true, but it had nothing to do with a house.

He decided that he'd go with me, after all.

She was there, housesitting or whatever they call it when the realtor hangs around while people troop through. She was covered with shiny makeup and smiling so much and for so long, she must have had cramps all around her mouth by day's end.

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It was a nice house. A perfect place to start all over with a new wife and a new life. Not too large and, as the realtor, Lili Beth Warsaw, said with a big wink at my husband, very sexy, and she would know.

George paid so little attention to her I knew it was for real. Never before had George not stared at something that pretty and fresh. He was either dead or this one mattered to him. This one was making plans with him.

I had no choice but to take action, although I didn't rush into anything. I played along, even about the house we'd seen, talking seriously about whether it would be a good idea, maybe as an investment for the future, because both of us acknowledged that it was too soon to downsize.

"It's always a good idea to see what's out there," he said.

I controlled the urge to say that I knew what was out there—and it was named Lili Beth Warsaw.

If I say that the real-estate woman haunted my every thought from then on, it is no exaggeration. Life went on, and my act was as good as George's. I worried over the kids and the house, as always, and I followed my routine and monitored George's, but all the time, she was in my mind about as much as she must have been in George's, and, perhaps like George as well, I was making plans that involved her.

In early spring, George had to go out of town on business. This was real, not monkey business, but as usual, it didn't get written down in his appointment book. George was never eager to leave a record of having contacted some of the types who were a part of his negotiations.

It wasn't difficult getting Lili Beth where I wanted her. I knew a lot about her already: knew she'd had one brief marriage—a Las Vegas elopement kind of thing—and she'd been single for a while and didn't like it. How would I know such things? Easy. Realtors these days, at least where we live, act like they're celebrities. Not enough to just list a house and say how many bedrooms it has. Now, the real-estate personality has emerged, and so I had the opportunity to read about who Ms. Warsaw was in cutesy-pie notices in the paper. I also, of course, had the opportunity to find out about dozens of other "friends and neighbors" with my best interests at heart.

The single-for-too-long thing was part of a Valentine's Day "profile" that ran mock personals for the entire staff of her company.

Then, of course, I had looked her up every other way I could without attracting attention, through rosters of the kind of civic booster groups realtors join, through small news items about charity events she'd attended or hosted. God bless the Internet for collecting trivia like an electronic janitor jabbing scraps with one of

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those sticks. You get a scrap here, a tidbit there, until you wind up knowing a whole lot.

Not that I needed much. It quickly became obvious that Lili Beth was a determined woman who wanted two things: lots of home sales and my husband.

Which is why it was easy to get her precisely when I wanted her. As my good luck and even better planning had it, while George was away, the kids were both on overnights, too. That left me and the cat, and a cat knows when to hold its tongue.

It took one phone call, which I placed while she was sitting at an open house. I wanted the call to be to her cell, not her office. I used a throw-away cell, myself. I said I was thinking of selling the house and was interested in a professional's view of what it was worth. I offered my first name. She didn't ask for more, but said she'd be over as soon as the inspection tour was over.

I didn't think she'd have been in the house before—even George couldn't have been that careless. All the same, there was no way in hell she wouldn't recognize the address. A woman like her would have long ago found out where her man lived, if only to judge his probable net worth.

She arrived promptly wearing a burgundy pants suit and that smile that was so wide, it looked as if it could cut her head in two. I knew she recognized me—that she had scoped me out that day of the Open House, months earlier. Her lover's wife—who wouldn't memorize every feature? So she knew who I was and I knew who she was, but we were both good at pretending we didn't, and I toured the house with her, letting her ooh and aah at each detail. For all I knew, she was planning on moving into this place herself, and George was going to dump me somewhere else.

After we'd seen every inch of the house and she'd written dimensions and realtor-talk in a tiny soft notebook, I took her out to the patio. It was a gorgeous early spring day and I was justly proud of my garden. We had a lot of land, and the garden was a work in progress. At the moment, the daffodils were up, the flowering plum was doing its thing in pink and mahogany, and the azaleas were on the verge of full bloom. I allowed her to do more oohing and aahing. I deserved it, whether or not she was sincere. This land was my canvas now, my masterpiece.

"Gorgeous," she said. "Such privacy, and such a lovely garden. Lilacs, my! And what's going here?"

As if she actually cared. "I used it for annuals the past two years," I said, "but I'm turning it over to perennials, and going to put the annuals in containers and . . ." Her eyes had glazed over. "Do you garden?" I asked.

"Oh no," she said with a little laugh. "Wish I could!" Everything she said had exclamation points all around it. "I'm in a condo with a tiny balcony. Room for one pot of geraniums if I'm lucky!"

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I could practically see through her skull to the fantasyland she was building in her mind. Actually, she wasn't building: She was grabbing—all of this, every bit of it, making it hers.

Not that she would ever garden, not with those lacquered nails, but she'd hire someone to keep up my good work and it wouldn't be the same at all. A garden's like a marriage: You can't acquire it and simply admire it. You have to work at it constantly, pay attention, keep away the pests, or it dies.

"This property wouldn't last a day on the market," she said. I'd almost forgotten why she thought we were here. "There's even room for a pool."

I let her go on, while I picked up a trowel lying nearby, and put on my garden gloves, puttering with a pot of irises while she babbled.

She inhaled deeply and smiled at the freshness of the air, at the smell of spring—at the prospect of long summer evenings out here with my husband, I'm sure.

She twirled around, carefully estimating the size of our lot with her conniving mind, turning to view the house from the patio, and with each move she became ever more assertive, informing me that it would be best if we "staged" our house to give it more appeal to buyers. That meant streamlining things, removing everything that wasn't essential—I'm sure she included me in that list. "And of course," she said, "with your garden and the way you're making it—those pots will be stunning on the patio!"

She was happy. Thrilled, even, so that seemed a good point at which to terminate our conversation. I stunned her with the trowel, put a patio pillow against her head, and shot her through the back of her skull.

I'm not saying my plan was clever or even original. I'm only saying it worked. I planted Lili Beth Warsaw in the future perennial bed which I'd carefully prepared. I also planted George's gun—I knew it would be forever before he noticed its absence—along with her little notebook and her pocketbook, although not before I removed her car keys and cell phone. I am a good gardener and the ground had been nicely turned, so it was easy enough to cover her up and, in fact, to arrange seventeen young plants in the fresh earth.

I then drove her car to the airport, left it in long-term parking, and took the shuttle back to the stop closest to my home. It was a lovely afternoon, and fine for walking. I knew that sooner or later, her car would be ticketed, then towed out of the airport lot, and her disappearance would be interpreted as deliberate.

I must mention, with all due humility, that I was right again, and that is what eventually happened.

Lili Beth Warsaw and my problems had both been made to dis-

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appear, and in their place appeared lavender, salvia, roses, phlox, and as a private joke with myself, a generous helping of lilies.

As I say, you can't let things slide in a garden or a marriage. You have to work at keeping them the way you want them to be.

Of course, George couldn't comment on his missing mistress, or share whatever degree of bewilderment or grief he may have felt, so peace reigned in my household. After he'd mourned a lot longer than I would have preferred, he slowly recuperated and reverted to his usual pattern of petty and sloppy deceits. Who cared? The marriage-fortress's walls were not being breached.

We had our usual confrontations about the bimbos.

He gave me a bracelet with diamonds spelling my name.

He hired a private trainer and a masseuse and installed a luxurious gym.

He gave me an emerald necklace that looked as if the Empress of All the Russias had been its former owner.

I can't even think of what all I received. Fur was no longer PC, so I was given coats made of the softest leather, handmade shoes.

They say you can't have it all, but I did. And then some.

The kids finished high school and entered college. I'd read that this was a dangerous time for the male of the species, that empty nest, and indeed, my problems started again. Or rather, what had restarted stopped again. No more guilty please-somebody-stop-me expression, no more sloppy covering of the tracks, no confessions, no tears.

The man had gone undercover literally and metaphorically. Just the way it had been with Lili Beth. He was extra nice to me. He had almost-believable excuses for his absences.

Déjà vu all over again, except it was worse this time. Despite the trainers and some nips and tucks, I wasn't young anymore. I knew what happened to ageing first wives, but I was not about to become another piece of roadkill on the marital highway.

George, on the other hand, was full of energy. He made major use of the household gym and the personal trainer. He jogged. He used hair-thickening drugs and maybe even those pep-up-the-body-parts drugs and he had the surgery where they slice your eyes so you don't have to wear glasses anymore.

He was, in short, a walking, talking cliché, but as disgusted as I was, I was not about to allow him to destroy my marriage after all my hard work. I began investigating my husband.

This one, I eventually learned, was a lawyer, like George. Too much like him. Even had three first names, just like him: Gina Allison Clare. An associate in the firm, also involved in criminal law, and like him, crafty and shrewd. And a looker as well. It wasn't hard getting a glimpse. I was the wife of the senior partner, after all, and all I needed to do, once I'd narrowed it down, was stop by at the office.

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She was twenty years his junior, at least, and stunning. And when our glances crossed, briefly, I would have sworn she was coolly appraising me, like a problem to be solved. And she looked as if she thought I wouldn't be a particularly difficult problem, either.

I was afraid she might be right, and I could tell right away that Gina Clare wasn't going to be a piece of cake like dumb and greedy Lili Beth. Besides, the garden now looked precisely the way I wanted it. There were no more empty beds to be filled in, and I wasn't as young as I used to be and my back wasn't up to digging another suitable gravesite.

Even more relevant—I was tired. My jewelry box was filled to overflowing, as were my closets, and I didn't want any more reparation payments from George. My children were on the way to their own lives, and as ever, I wanted to set a good example for them of a solid, stable marriage. I couldn't let George—or what's-her-face—ruin that.

I tried waiting it out. Tried believing that I could ride this through, that this was nothing more than middle-aged crazy. But I was also middle-aged, so I didn't have forever to find out if George was going to get over it.

His good-guy façade began to crack under the weight of his impatience to move on, even though he never said that outright. Instead, he found fault with me for doing things precisely the way I'd done them for the past twenty-four years. He took to sitting silently for hours. The room would grow dark around him if I didn't turn on the lamps. Infantile how he sat there pining away, like a junior-high-school boy with a crush, if junior-high boys were balding and jowly.

He tossed and turned half the night.

"Lots on your mind?" I finally asked one day. I knew he was defending a man accused of killing five people and though George couldn't say so, he knew the man had done it. I knew the man had done it. Every human with a functioning brain knew the man had done it. But George had found ways to discredit eyewitnesses, to present—let's be honest, to fabricate—a time scheme that put the killer somewhere else despite all evidence to the contrary. In short, George was doing what he did so well, justifying the high opinion of him in the less savory segments of society.

But he was, as always, infuriating others. I'd seen letters to the editor about how George Alexander and his ilk corrupted the system, twisted it so badly it was deformed. He wasn't winning any popularity contests these days, and though he always said he didn't care, I knew that at some point, he did.

But when I asked the question, he didn't respond with his usual annoyance about how people didn't understand the need to give everybody the best defense. The legal system—aside, of course,

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from its divorce laws—was apparently the last thing on his heavily weighted mind. First he looked surprised, then goofy and relieved, and then he nodded and sighed.

This was a man about to spill his guts. True Confessions were imminent, and I didn't want any part. I didn't want to hear about it because I was positive that this time, the word "divorce" would emerge from his lips and that one word would shatter my life's work, this creation I'd built and maintained—my marriage. We would become one more statistic, one more broken home. I could not allow that to happen. Can you blame me? I pretended I had something to do in another room, and I prevented his saying anything at all.

And what I did in that other room was think. I needed a plan. Another plan so that Gorgeous Gina didn't destroy what I had built with, yes, my sweat and my tears.

I'm a thrifty woman. A good housekeeper who likes everything in its place. Even George admits that. Waste not, want not could be my motto through good times and bad. I salvage what is salvageable and recycle the rest, and that includes a perfectly fine husband and marriage.

I thought briefly again about "planting" Gina in the garden. It had been a flawless maneuver and would undoubtedly work again. But it felt redundant to murder another woman, and it made me nervous—I didn't want that sort of thing to become a bad habit.

So instead, I recycled Lili.

Don't take that literally. I didn't destroy my glorious flower beds by digging her up. But I reused her all the same.

Time had passed. I couldn't say then, or now, whether I'd planned this all along, but maybe the idea was squirreled away—saved for a rainy day, in case of emergency. As I said, I'm a thrifty woman, despite the luxury in which I live.

I spent a lot of time thinking it through, weighing the pros and cons, looking for booby traps, and waiting till I was sure it would work.

It had been a long time since I'd acted, not since before my marriage. Except, of course, for acting like I didn't know what was going on too much of the time.

I decided a vaguely Slavic accent would work. I rented *Ninotchka* and listened to Garbo pretend to be a Russian. I'd been told her accent was laughably bad, but if it worked for her, why not for me? By the end of the movie, I was close enough for my purposes. I made the call from one of the phones near the restrooms at the city's finest hotel. "Is police?" I asked. "I have need talk police about crime. Bad crime. A killing."

That got their interest. "No," I said. "Not now. Crime happen five years, April ten. I know day. I visiting my cousin that day, and I

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see it and do nothing. Too afraid. Is how it is from Russia. Now I feel bad. I think maybe, is forgot, is long ago, but then I see on TV, the old cases—the cold, yes? I see the cold police in U.S.A. still care, so now I tell you. I saw man kill lady and bury her in yard. I tell you where."

I explained that back then, my cousin worked for a lady in the neighborhood, and it was so nice out, we'd gone for a walk. My cousin knew a shortcut to a small stream, and we were crossing it when we heard a noise. We didn't know what it was, but we crept closer and saw him bury a woman. We were too afraid to say anything at the time, sure we'd be deported—or killed by the same crazy man.

I did quite a fine shudder and stammer as I said this.

"My cousin did not know dead lady," I continued. "Me, of course not, how could I? But she knows man who owns house. Alexander is last name. Important man, she say."

They asked my name. "First name, Roazyczka," I said. "R-o-a-z-y-c-z-" Three times, I reached that point, and the man asked me to start over. And to tell him my last name. "No, no. I can't. I—"

"You won't get in trouble," he said. "I need it for the form. And your cousin's name, too."

"She goes back to Russia. Not here no more. I hang up now, mister. I am not . . . I am not legal. Maybe you don't hurt me, but the INS—"

He sighed. I knew he would. He wanted the address more than my name, and I gave it to him. "Now is flowers on top," I said. "I have looked since then."

I hung up. Quick, efficient, and Roazyczka turned back into an expensively dressed, buffed, and maintained middle-aged suburbanite.

Poor George. They got that warrant together faster than I could have imagined. There went my perennial bed, after all, but the flowers were sacrificed in the name of the sanctity of marriage.

Of course he couldn't say where he'd been that week. His appointment book showed no trips, and he didn't have proof of having been away. His lifelong expertise at leaving no trail or traces was effective, though not in the way he might have wished.

It didn't help that they could immediately identify the human remains, because the remains of Lili Beth's purse were there as well. As was, alas, George's gun. The prints on it were pretty messed up at this point, but they surely weren't mine. Garden gloves don't leave prints.

Turned out, others had known about the affair. Lili Beth hadn't been discreet. This time, this wife really had been the last to know.

The prosecution made it clear that George had had a string of women—even I was surprised by the variety of entries on the list they produced—and he'd dropped each in turn. Lili Beth was, then,

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one in a series, but the scenario they constructed was that she hadn't accepted her walking papers and wasn't about to be dropped.

I had to admire the way the prosecution put together a story that made a lot of sense. Apparently, Lili Beth had come to the house for a confrontation when George was there alone, and then, with pressure and conflict and fear that the wife—I—would return at any moment, it became an all-too-predictable crime of passion.

Of course George pleaded innocent. But you could almost see how happy the D.A.'s office was to have him in deep trouble—the same deep trouble most of George's clients had been in. Unfortunately, George did not have George as his lawyer, so George was pretty much doomed.

I was given permission to replant my perennial bed, and I must say making the garden lovely again helped me handle my tension over this terrible mess.

Throughout the trial, I stood by my man. Humiliated as I might have been with the public revelations of George's extramarital adventures, I remained steadfast, and the truth was, I wasn't acting. I was sad my husband had wound up being tried, but I preferred that to my marriage being tried to its limits.

Gina, I must say, attended the trial on its first day. That must have been enough for her, because she never came back.

George was given a life sentence. Even if he is granted a parole in fifteen or twenty years, by then he'll be beyond much more than wishful thinking. I will never again be the last to know, because there won't be anything to know.

There's comfort in that.

I'm sleeping better than I ever did, now that I have no worries about where and with whom my husband may have strayed.

There's comfort in that, too.

These days, we understand and accept each other. That's one of the pluses of a long and solid marriage. It came about during one of my first visits to the prison, when he insisted, as always, that he was innocent.

"Yes, George," I said calmly. I looked him in the eye. "I know that. I of all people on earth, I, your wife, absolutely, with all my heart and soul, know that you did not commit that crime."

He was silent for quite some time, staring at me. No more was ever said about any of it. But since then, he's treated me with a great deal of respect.

Our marriage has matured, and our relationship is better than it ever was. Every day, I feel a rush of joy knowing that we're among the lucky ones, the couples who see it through and stay together, and that I've done my share, my part, in keeping us intact.

I hope I've set a good example for my children as well.

Life is good. ●

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THE DAY AFTER

by Barbara Callahan

If I took a survey of victims of various calamities and asked, "What was the best day of your life?" I believe their answers might be "the day before I was viciously mugged in the park" or "the day before my lab test came back positive" or "the day before the flood waters ravaged my home."

The *day before* might have been filled with mundane chores like cleaning out the garage, catching up on paperwork, or shopping at the supermarket. Yet in its ordinariness the *day before* glows with a luminosity that outshines every other day of one's life, a wonderful but unappreciated time before the calamity occurred.

As this issue goes to press, the U.S. mid-term elections are only a couple of weeks behind us, which makes the following story seem timely. It's a tale about the ruthlessness of politics in our age—and how that ruthlessness might lead to something more dangerous. . . . Ms. Callahan has been contributing to *EQMM* for many years. †

I spent my *day before* in my office tidying up, a euphemism for routine chores like the dispensing of documents that had successfully shredded the political career of Josephine Klymer, a former candidate for governor from the New Visions party. Into the machine went legal records affirming her as a corespondent in a nasty divorce suit, as well as data on a fifteen-year-old shoplifting conviction. Since I would be taking my first real vacation in years, aside from an occasional overnight at my cabin in the mountains, it was essential that I not leave any evidence that might compromise my sources—the paralegals, administrative assistants, disgruntled employees, and computer hackers who feed the voracious appetites of those who thrive on holding on to political power.

As an "oppo," an opposition researcher for the Reliance Party in my state, I provided a catering service, so to speak, for the mighty. For fifteen years, I compiled information on candidates from the opposition party. The dossiers I created successfully blocked New Vision-ers from any significant offices. From my humble beginnings as an envelope-stuffing college volunteer in the senatorial reelection campaign of Will Stafford, I graduated into the exciting and well-paying world of oppos. Will Stafford himself spotted my

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talent after I passed along to his campaign manager the gossip that jump-started my career.

"So you're the pretty little thing who discovered my unworthy opponent's sleazy activities, which just happened to get leaked to the press," Will said.

Blushing, I told the senator that on a date, I saw the candidate and a young woman sipping wine at Rosie's, an out-of-the-way bar. When they left, I thought we could have some fun by following them, which we did, to Rendez-Vous, a bar/motel favored by those whose trysts do not require romantic ambience.

After my recitation, Will ran his index finger across his lips, a now too-familiar gesture, zippering his smile as a prelude to serious scrutiny. At that moment, I knew I was being assessed by a master appraiser, but I had to wait until after his landslide victory to know why.

At the celebration of his win he deftly maneuvered past the crowd of the party faithful, shaking hands only when necessary to part the seas of well-wishers, and came to me.

"Outside," he said, nodding toward the exit leading to the parking lot and then turning toward the celebrants and selecting a recipient for a bear hug.

Too nervous to get my coat, I obeyed and waited, shivering, next to the building, wondering why I had been jettisoned from the celebration. Thoroughly chilled after five minutes and regretting not having driven to the event, I sidled over to the nearest car, praying that it would be unlocked. As I touched its handle, a high-pitched alarm lacerated the stillness of the night. I charged back to my wall and crouched behind a trash can as light flooded the parking lot.

Will Stafford himself strolled casually toward the Lexus and deactivated the alarm. Of all the cars in the lot, I had chosen his to break into.

"You can come out now," he said, "and legitimately get into my car."

Grateful for potential warmth, I climbed in.

He drove about a mile to the duck pond in Stenton Park before speaking. "Well, now I know three things about you," he said. "One is that you follow orders immediately no matter how uncomfortable you might get. Two, you are not above a little lawbreaking to get what you need, like seeking shelter in my car. And three, you have a nose for sniffing out garbage, like who is cheating on whom."

That night those three qualifications landed me the high-paying job of Director of Research for the Reliance Party.

"Just tell your friends, Anne," he ordered, "that you oversee research on legislation that I'll have to vote on."

I never saw a piece of legislation, but I did see documents removed from the offices of psychiatrists, lawyers, and commissioners of various state departments, as well as reports submitted by our private investigators. Not all my research material, how-

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ever, arrived via paper. Eve Granahan, our crack computer hacker, transferred e-mail files from unsophisticated users into my computer under the file she named Karaoke after "the amateurs that croak their hearts out to us eager hackers."

The amateurs skewered by Eve's scorn were those who didn't realize that their e-mail messages, as well as photos appended to them, did not disappear into the ether when they hit the delete key. Her latest contribution to Karaoke featured J. Robert Banning's romp in the surf with two bikini-clad teenage boys. No matter that J. Robert was only twenty-one years old and his only elected office was that of senior class president of Masterson College. He came from a socially prominent family who had retired from New Visions state politics before Will Stafford arrived. Quite possibly, the good-looking scion might cast his political genes upon the scene in the near future. Preparing well in advance for that eventuality, we were collecting data to smudge the family album. No matter that J. Robert's surf buddies were his nephews visiting from Ibiza. If J. Robert ever did decide to toss his hat into the ring, we would toss the photo to the media. Taken by surprise, and before he could sputter an explanation, J. Robert's campaign volunteers would be drawing Groucho moustaches on his posters.

Compiling dossiers on potential candidates is essential for effective, timely opposition response. It would be foolhardy for an oppo like myself to wait until a candidate is announced and thereby lose precious time scrambling for damaging material. Professionals must anticipate. In a sense, I was like obituary writers who for the sake of timeliness have researched and written up the entire lives and careers of celebrities months and years before they die.

Although not as well endowed as our winning team, New Visions does fund a part-time oppo of their own, a high-school music teacher, a clarinetist, actually, whom I had dubbed the *oppo-tune-ist.* Between directing the band and teaching classes, Jeffrey Cobb didn't have too much time to research our slate. An expensive lunch at the Salle de Fleur for his ex-girlfriend netted me the information that Jeff's oppo dossier consisted only of a portfolio of newspaper clippings.

Over crème brûlée, Jeffrey's ex confirmed something I had long suspected—New Visions had a dossier on me.

Feigning shock, I watched as she removed a folder from her handbag. Expecting a meager newspaper clipping or two, I was not disappointed. I flipped past them but frowned at the single sheet of paper in the folder.

"Read it in the privacy of your home." She grinned. "And thanks for the lunch."

On the way to my condo, I thought about the possible revelations on that sheet of paper. The five parking tickets accumulated in the course of my work, paid for, of course, by the party? The time before I proved my worth to the party when I bought a three-

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hundred-dollar dress, tucked the tags inside, and wore it to a formal occasion before returning it to the store? My several library fines? Merely peccadilloes. I live such a blameless life that Will Stafford refers to me as Mother Superior.

Prepared to be amused by the non-revelations, I poured myself a glass of Chardonnay and opened the folder. Several newspaper photos of me at political galas fluttered to the floor. In one, I was wearing the black organza number I returned to the store. At the time it appeared in the *News,* I prayed that the salesperson from Bon-Ton didn't see it.

The single sheet of paper, however, rested in my lap for several minutes after I read it. In a flippant style, Jeffrey Cobb wrote about me as if he were briefing a frat brother about a potential blind date.

Subject: Anne McGill

Age: 37

Marital Status: Single, married to the job

Current Romantic Status: Dead in the water. Ongoing 24/7 platonic relationships with Will Stafford and his cronies. Although attractive in an evil Mary Poppins sort of way (doles out spoonfuls of sugar to our side when she's really knifing us in the back), she isn't actively trolling for a relationship. I know that for a fact because I came on to her at a Stafford appearance at my high school in my Tom Cruise persona, which has never failed me yet, but she blew me off.

I sipped my wine and conjured up the memory of Jeff Cobb flashing his orthodontist's expertise at me as I passed out the senator's leaflets to the Political Science Club. Who is this guy grinning like an idiot, I thought. Did I know him from somewhere, and if so, how could I forget his radioactive smile? I read on.

Education: Somerton Girls High, valedictorian, 1986; Everett College, 1990; GPA: 3.8; Major: Political Science.

Work Career: Recruited immediately after college by Will (in-at-the-Kill) Stafford as Research Director (a.k.a. Oppo). Affectionately known throughout the state as Machiavellian Mama.

Success Rate: 100%. Need I tell you guys that we haven't won a local, state, or national election since she took the job.

Skeletons in Closet: Not even a knuckle. Boring, middle-class suburban upbringing. Mom, Dad (now deceased), and herself. A dog named Pooch (now deceased, how thorough I am!) who did bite the mailman. Hey, maybe we can do a work-up on Pooch. Interview the neighbors and their pets and all the postal workers who delivered to her house.

Extracurricular Activities like Travel to Hot Singles Getaways: Forget it! She has a cozy little cabin in the mountains that she inherited from her parents. Goes there about once or twice a year to renew acquaintances with squirrels and pine trees.

Conclusion: I'll keep trying. Hey, I'm an underpaid history teacher, band director, and clarinetist (who often does creative riffs so don't count me out). I thank you for the oppo-tunity to serve the

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party and get paid for it. Never fear. I'll find something to put her out of business. Your obedient oppo, Jeffrey Cobb.

I crumpled the paper and threw it across the room, mumbling, "Don't bet on it, Frat Boy, you're not cool enough to outwit the Machiavellian Mama." In need of a refill, I went to the fridge and poured more wine while thinking that I'd skewer that creep. "Jeffrey Cobb, you're shish-kebab," I said aloud. Amused, I repeated the silly rhyme all the way back to the sofa until I sank onto the cushions and started to cry.

Okay, I chose my job, knowing full well the land mines I'd have to set to destroy our enemies. For the most part, I believe I have done the public a service, saving them from some really toxic types, but I also admit that I deprived the public of some really deserving types by magnifying their transgressions or making some up. What Jeffrey Cobb doesn't know, however, is that I have on occasion refused to deliver the dirt on a sympathetic person, such as Matt Myers, who was running for a municipal judgeship. Sure I knew that Myers was seeing his secretary away from work, but I also knew that his wife was a paraplegic to whom Matt had devoted almost his entire life. Myers lost, but not because of me. So, Jeff, you rude dude, I am not a heartless monster.

The phone rang, shattering the maudlin moment. It was Will with his usual terse message: "Tomorrow, eight-thirty, same place."

Although it's doubtful that any opponent would have been so foolhardy as to tap Will's phone, the senator kept his calls short, believing, perhaps, that a network of spies was being paid by the word by the mysterious "They" that dogged him. The command to go to the same place meant the duck pond at Stenton Park.

He arrived before I did, which allowed me to watch him toss breadcrumbs to the ducks, his affection for them his most, and possibly his only, endearing trait. Although charisma-deprived, the sixty-five-year-old senator, short in stature and long in craftiness, had won four elections by presenting himself as Silent Will, a man of few words who could be trusted like his hero Silent Cal Coolidge. Aware that this Duck Pond Summit meant a new assignment, I hesitated by the weeping willow tree, still stung by Jeffrey Cobb's write-up. After a few seconds, I pulled myself together and approached the senator. Unhappy at being tailgated, Will emptied the bag of breadcrumbs and barked, "You're late."

By a mere two minutes, actually, but to Will Stafford, no minutes of his life ranked as "mere." Without further preamble, he said, "New kid on the block. Just moved back from eighteen years in Colorado. Maintained a residence here, which qualifies him to run for freeholder. Already sent in the paperwork. Registered as a New Visions candidate. Thirty-eight years old. Widower with one child. Good-looking guy. Get something on him quick."

"Name?"

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"Greg McKenna."

Energized by the anticipation of hunting new quarry, Will tipped his hat and strolled briskly out of the park. Depressed about going after a widower with a child, I stared at the ducks for a while before calling Eve, the computer whiz, on my cell phone. In terse Stafford-speak, I said, "Greg McKenna, thirty-eight years old, Colorado."

Two hours later, Eve tossed a printout on my desk.

"I found only one Greg McKenna and he's from Glenwood Falls."

Reluctantly I read the information, then relaxed. St. Peter himself would usher this guy right through the Heavenly Gates.

"You found a real saint," I said. "Choir director, Boy Scout leader, on-time taxpayer, thirty-five years at the same sporting-goods company. Not a parking ticket nor a complaint about a barking dog."

Beaming, I reached into my handbag and handed her the usual cash payment.

Eve scowled. "You're not very sharp today."

"Oh, did I miss something?"

"Maybe math isn't your forte," she answered. "Check out Greg McKenna's work record—thirty-five years with the same company. He must have started there when he was three years old. Your guy is thirty-eight, right?"

She shoved the money into her backpack. "Some kind of scam is going on, but I have absolute confidence that you'll snuff it out. Ciao."

Identity theft, of course. For the first time since reading Jeffrey Cobb's write-up on me, I welcomed the thought of nailing another opponent. In fact, I intended to have some fun. Before I'd pass this data to Will, I'd schmooze a bit with the fake Greg McKenna at the Meet the Candidates reception the next day.

Feeling downright sadistic—a much more uplifting feeling than Jeffrey Cobb-inspired guilt—I breezed into the Shelton Hotel. As I was checking my coat, Will Stafford tapped my shoulder.

"What have you got for me on that matter we talked about yesterday?"

"Nothing yet, but I'm working on it."

"Don't dawdle. I want a full report by Monday."

Nodding toward the banquet room, he added, "Get some face-time with the Colorado Kid. Over by the nonalcoholic punch bowl."

I waited a moment until Will had floated into a sea of sycophants before heading toward the punch bowl, where I witnessed an enchanting sight: A tall, slender man bowed to a little blond-haired girl and in a princely gesture handed her a cup of juice. She in turn curtsied to him. Registering my first sight of Greg, widower and father of a four-year-old, sapped some of my oppo resolve. When he glanced at me and smiled, I saw an adult version of Jim Driscoll, my first love in high school. In complete meltdown, I focused on a three-tiered plate of cheese cubes and nervously stabbed at

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them, creating a pyramid on my dish. And I don't even like cheese.

Chiding myself for this foolish reaction to a good-looking man, I put my plate on an empty table and headed toward the lounge to comb that man right out of my head. With each fierce swipe I reminded myself that this sweet-looking guy had stolen the identity of Greg McKenna and that he mustn't be too swift in the brains department not to realize that we'd spot the deception within hours of his filing his candidacy. Regaining my oppo resolve, I pledged to demonize him.

Having mentally rejoined the battle, I marched over to the drinks table and seized a glass of white wine. On my first sip, a bump against my arm sent the soothing liquid down my skirt. I whirled around and saw the handsome prince hug his little princess and tell her that it was Daddy's fault that the punch spilled on my skirt.

"I bumped your arm, sweetheart," he soothed. "I'll tell the pretty lady I'm sorry."

Clumsily, he grabbed several napkins from the table and thrust them at me, accompanied by a chorus of "I'm sorry"s and "I'll ask the waiter for club soda." Blushing and mumbling for him not to bother, I dabbed at my skirt and joined the regulars paying homage to Will, who scowled at me for leaving Greg McKenna. For the first time in our relationship, Will's displeasure didn't faze me. I needed time to reclaim my oppo persona before I did my job and morphed the handsome prince into a frog.

Perhaps pricking my thumb as I arranged the roses Greg sent to my home the next day should have served as a warning about succumbing to fairy tales, but it didn't. Heart fluttering, I read the attached card:

Dear Anne,

A kind schoolteacher who is quite the political activist saw my dilemma over the spilled wine and gave me your address. Please accept these roses from Melissa and me. (She still feels responsible.) Melissa is hoping that she can treat you to lunch at McDougal's. I'll call tomorrow to see if you'll agree.
Greg McKenzie.

Greg McKenzie! Not Greg McKenna! I grabbed my roses and danced around the room, ignoring the little drop of blood that fell on the carpet. One of Will's cronies had goofed. I waltzed over to the phone to call Eve and order a search on the real name, but skidded to a stop. No, I would not call Eve. At that moment it didn't matter to me what the party needed to know about Greg McKenzie. I had learned all I needed to know about him from a spilled glass of wine.

And from a spilled container of French fries. How graciously he scooped up the mound that my elbow had sent to the floor of McDougal's.

"Just want to lighten the clean-up load of the minimum-wagers,"

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he smiled as he dumped them into the trash bin.

"Daddy always says we should help people we don't even know," Melissa said. "Do you help people you don't even know?"

"Well, I try to," I told the sweet child, and blinked away memories of hatchet jobs on strangers, grateful that a misspelling had kept her father's head off the block. And such a nice head it was, I thought as he grinned at me, slid back into his seat, and put on his political hat.

"There are so many items on my agenda," he said, "but I am a complete unknown here. I've been away since high school. I have no name or face recognition. I need something big to get my candidacy out there. I almost don't know where to start."

But like a seasoned politician, he did start, and sometime during Melissa's sundae, he got the cue that I thought came too soon. His daughter yawned.

"She's preparing me for the reaction of constituents to long-winded types," he laughed. "It's time to take the princess back to the castle."

Protesting non-fatigue, Melissa dimpled at me before turning to Greg and saying, "But we will see Anne again, won't we, Daddy?"

"I sure hope so, Princess," he answered.

"Maybe a trip to the zoo?" I offered to show my willingness to include Melissa in a future relationship, a suggestion I later regretted not because of the child, but as evidence of my utter naiveté. She clapped her hands and Greg smiled. We made a date for the following Tuesday.

As a trio that focused on Melissa's needs, we arranged to visit other child-friendly spots as soon as we left the previous one. My feelings for Greg blossomed as I witnessed his love for his daughter and experienced his gratitude for my presence at these outings. At the zoo, he held my hand as we sat on a bench and watched Melissa laugh at the monkeys. In the darkness of the aquarium, he put his arm around me as I shuddered at the sight of the sharks at feeding time. When leaving Bo-Peep Land, he kissed my cheek before settling Melissa into her booster seat to return her to day care and to go to his job at a law firm.

Those signs of affection helped to quiet the nagging thought that I might as well be auditioning for the job of Melissa's nanny. True love, as my forty-seven-year-married mother used to say, starts as an ember and turns into a flame. Easy does it, I told myself. Besides, those child-oriented "dates" served my purposes well. None of Will Stafford's inner circle hung out at Bo-Peep Land or any of our other venues to report to the chief that his oppo was consorting with the enemy. And whoever was managing Greg's campaign was doing a wonderful job of keeping him away from the age group that actually votes. Greg didn't need my help to lose; his endearing political cluelessness would do the job.

Unfortunately, the neglect of my oppo duties did not go unnoticed by a real pro. Accustomed to instant results, Will summoned

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me three times in a week to the duck pond—a place I didn't dare go with Greg and Melissa.

"So where's the stuff on McKenna?" he growled.

Hoping to buy time for my relationship with Greg McKenzie, I didn't correct Will's mistake.

"I'm working on it."

"What's taking so long?"

"My computer genius ran into a firewall."

He frowned. "So get another one, someone smart enough not to run into a wall."

I flashed him a superior smile. "Firewall is a computer term for protection devices. She'll get past it."

The second time, I told him that Eve was nanoseconds away from chiseling through the firewall. The third time, I told him that Eve was inside the vault, but the data bank had changed its coding system. From the look he gave me, I knew there would be no fourth time, at least at the duck pond.

In high color and high dudgeon, he arrived at my office in no mood to play computer games.

"I'll have that report on McKenna by five today or you can start clearing out your office."

As soon as he slammed the door, I started the purification process, not on my resume but on Greg's background. I made him good, but not too good, hoping I might in my fictionalized account hit on some truths. In our child-centered encounters, aside from political views and his parenting philosophy, I had actually learned little about him—except references to hiking in Colorado. I realize now that I was unwilling to probe so that if pressed by the party, I could function like a spy who knows only a small piece of the puzzle.

The Greg McKenzie for Will's Eyes Only had won a basketball scholarship to the University of Colorado, but had a mediocre first year along with problems with grades. He dropped out of school for a year and worked as a guide for fishermen and hunters, but returned to the academic life at Sayres Junior College in Wyoming, where he excelled, and returned to the university to graduate with a degree in political science. He went to law school, didn't make the Law Review, but passed the bar on his first try. After school, he worked at a firm specializing in corporate law. When his wife died, he was so preoccupied that he forgot to pay several hundred dollars' worth of parking fines and had to go to traffic court or lose his license.

At four-thirty, I hand-delivered the goods on the nonexistent Greg McKenna.

Without a word, Will motioned me to sit on the chair next to him, a strategically placed seat for those destined for up-close-and-personal bawling-outs. The almost spotless report I turned in merited a stentorian outburst: "Pure unadulterated pap . . . paying you six figures for this junk . . . this guy can give our party trouble

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. . . you find out he had some parking tickets . . . where did you get this stuff from, the *Little Scouts Monitor*? . . . I want dirt and you give me the cleanest little boy in the class . . . you're losing it."

When he paused for breath, I amazed myself by standing up and shouting, "No, you're losing it. You've wallowed in mud so long you can't believe that there's anybody out there who's decent. This is a good man, Will Stafford, a real novelty in our line of work. And by the way, I'm sick of digging up dirt. I quit!"

Backing away, but not out of fear, I headed toward the door, where I paused for a second to give Will rebuttal time, to launch a string of his pithy epithets that would have furthered my resolve to quit. Nothing. Only a full second of ponderous silence. Ominous, but I didn't care. For the first time since becoming his employee, I felt noble.

At home, I composed my short and noble resignation letter: "I can no longer participate in a process that believes in the inherent evil in all human beings." Two days later I received a letter from Will: "Resignation not accepted. You've been working too hard and I regret going off about Greg McKenna. Enclosed is vacation pay."

Wow! I had bullied a bully and won. I practically skipped into the natural-history museum to meet Greg and Melissa for a tour designed for preschoolers. After exchanging a hug with the child, I suggested to Greg that we three lunch afterwards at Delilah's Deli, a favorite spot of Will and his staffers. Now that Will had accepted the fact that I couldn't find anything on Greg, I had no reason to hide from my boss. In fact, my going public would show Will how hard I tried to get inside Greg's head. But instead of responding happily to the idea of going to lunch at an adult place, Greg frowned.

"Listen, I have a favor to ask of you. I have to meet a client nearby for a deposition that won't take long. I was going to ask you if you could stay with Melissa for the hour and then I'll pick her up. She'll have lunch at day care."

Although acutely disappointed, I managed a smile as he slipped into the crowd. Unaware that her father had left, Melissa pulled me toward the long line of excited children and advised me not to be afraid of the dinosaurs that we'd see. In the middle of an explanation of the pterodactyl's eating habits, my mind drifted and slammed into the Big Doubt. Could Greg be hiding us out in children's places because he was seeing another woman?

There was a way to find out, but I hesitated to use it since pumping a child had never been in my repertoire. However, my need to know quickly muffled the small voice of my newly awakened conscience. As Melissa squeezed closer to me to allow another child to see, I put my arm around her small shoulders. She would know about her father's friends. I stroked her long blond hair and said, "Melissa, does your daddy have any other friends that he sees a lot?"

"Only Jeff," she whispered as the docent continued to speak.

Delighted with her answer, I avidly followed the dinosaur's

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menus. As the tour was returning to the rotunda, Melissa spun around. Lip quivering, she asked, "Where's Daddy?" At that moment, Greg waved to her from the end of the line.

"I stayed too long looking at the reptiles," he told her, "and lost my place."

At the gift shop, as Melissa debated over buying Terry Pterodactyl or Iggy Iguanodon, Greg said, "I'm sorry about not going to Delilah's. I just realized that we have had no time alone together and these juvenile outings might not be too interesting for you."

"Oh no," I protested, but not too strongly.

"I'm thinking of taking some time off now to gear up for the real work in the primaries. If you can take some time off too, would you like to go away with Melissa and me? Someplace quiet, away from phones and TV? Maybe the mountains?"

"That would be great," I answered.

"The three of us could have a wonderful time outdoors."

He paused before adding meaningfully, "And Melissa goes to bed early."

"That would be great," I repeated and I actually think I batted my eyelashes. "As a matter of fact, Will just suggested that I take some time off before the heavy hitting starts."

He smiled, then frowned. "I hope it's not too late to rent a cabin for next week. I know fall is a popular time in the Poconos."

"That's not a problem," I answered. "As luck would have it, I own a family cabin in the Poconos that I hardly use. I loved it as a child and I know Melissa will too. Absolutely no twenty-first-century intrusions. It's completely stocked with nonperishable food. Hospitality of the mountains, you know."

"Fantastic." He smiled.

We sealed the arrangement with a surreptitious kiss behind a display of children's books.

To eliminate worries about anyone finding incriminating material in my office, I shredded files for three days. Officially on vacation, I was interrupted only once. Eve stopped in one morning looking for more work.

"Looks like you're clearing out," she said. "New job?"

"No, just a vacation."

"No business for me, then, while you're away?"

"No." I smiled.

"Not even some more sleuthing on McKenna, the ID thief?"

"Not even on him."

"I think you're making a mistake," she said on her way out.

The first chill of foreboding hit me.

"I don't think so," I said softly.

"Suit yourself. Ta ta."

The morning of the fourth day, I packed for the mountains—plenty of jeans and tees, but also a teddy or two, just in case. Since

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Greg wasn't to pick me up until twelve-thirty, I had time to go into the office to finish purging the files, not realizing that henceforth I would look upon this day of mindless chores as the best day of my life, the day I'd return to in a nanosecond if only God let us shift our life gears into reverse.

At ten-thirty, I had nothing left to do but prop my feet on my desk and stare at my suitcase and backpack and visualize using their contents during my time with Greg. Just as I was picturing Greg lifting me onto the swing hanging from the oak tree next to the cabin, the phone rang.

For a moment, some kind of background whirring sound kept me from making out the caller.

"Sorry about the traffic noise," Greg shouted. "I left my cell phone in my car, so I'm calling from a pay phone. I'm having a bad car day. My car died right after I dropped Melissa for the morning at day care. I rode with the tow-truck driver to the dealer's and the news isn't good."

"What's the matter?"

"Some kind of complicated under-the-hood problem and the mechanic needs a part from another shop. It looks like we won't be able to leave today."

After my stomach dropped from the penthouse to the basement, I brightened. "No problem. We can take my car."

"I don't think so. I left Melissa's booster seat and CDs in the car. I can't ask the dealer's driver to go back to get them. He's taking me and three other people home. He just stopped to get gas. Besides, it's being towed to another location and this driver doesn't know where. So leaving today's off. Melissa is going to be devastated."

"Not if I leave now and go to Kiddie Korner and buy another one and some CDs for the trip," I quickly offered.

Pause. "I don't like to trouble you."

"No trouble, a pleasure."

"You're wonderful. I'll reimburse you. And I'll try to get to the cabin tonight. This will work out."

And it did work out, at least the logistics part of the plan on my end. I went to Kiddie Korner, bought the booster seat and several children's CDs. I set the booster seat into the backseat of my car and strapped it in. At twelve-ten, I arrived at the library and waited outside as Greg had asked until he arrived via bicycle with Melissa on the child's seat.

"This is fun," Melissa called. "I hope Daddy always picks me up on a bike."

"Not likely," he grinned, mopping his forehead. "I'll take Melissa into the children's room to get *Emma and the Playful Platypus.*" And to me he said, "Wait for me in the adult section, okay? I need to go over a few grown-up things with you."

After settling Melissa with her book, he rushed into the room

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and with no preliminaries, launched the knockout punch.

"I called the dealer before I left home. The car won't be ready until tomorrow."

"That's no problem. We're taking my car anyway."

He ruffled my hair. "It's not that simple. I'm going to have to wait till tomorrow. I can't go away and leave it at the dealer's after I hassled him to do a rush job. Stan's a friend as well as a constituent and he promised to drive it to my place himself. I'll come up tomorrow."

Taking a backseat to Stan the dealer hurt, but I refrained from losing my cool. A well-trained political operative, I knew better than to come between a candidate and a constituent.

Ironically, we stood by a paperback section labeled Romance Novels as he matter-of-factly assigned me the Nanny role with instructions about Melissa. She didn't need to stop for bathroom breaks—a veritable camel, that child; she should eat her peanut butter and jelly sandwich and carrot sticks in the car—they were in her backpack along with juice; and she should sing along with the CDs I bought—because listening to the car radio with its news about fires and floods upsets her.

I was about to say, Yes, Mr. Rochester, but bit my tongue as I remembered that Jane Eyre did marry her boss.

"One more thing," he said as we headed back to Melissa. "I looked up directions to your cabin on a map. Then I checked highway conditions. You should take the alternate route. There's major construction on the main highway to the Poconos."

At the entrance to the children's room he hugged me.

"I'll really miss you tonight, but I'll make it up to you tomorrow night," he whispered, then squared his shoulders and slipped to the side of the entrance, out of Melissa's sight.

"Listen, Melissa's been terrible about goodbyes ever since her mother died. I don't want her to make a scene. She'll be all right if she doesn't see me. I explained everything to her and she's okay with you taking her and she'll be asleep before she realizes I won't be there till tomorrow. I'm going to slip out the back."

He kissed me and murmured, "I'm a worrier, so please call me after Melissa's asleep, usually by eight, and let me know you arrived safely. My phone number is on a card in Melissa's backpack."

Warm from the kiss, I watched him leave, then went into the children's room and hugged Melissa. "Let's go," I said.

She looked around then started to cry, "Where's Daddy? I didn't give him hugs and kisses."

So much for Daddy's slipping away to avoid a scene. I tried to soothe her, but she howled. Several mothers and children looked our way. The librarian frowned.

I picked her up and hugged her. She dropped the book. I retrieved it and hurried out the door, hoping Greg hadn't gotten far so he could perform the goodbye ritual. I couldn't see him.

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When we got to my car, I pointed to a stack of children's CDs.

"You pick out which one you want to play first."

Her cries reduced to hiccups, she browsed through them and selected *Mother Goose Rhymes.* "Can we play them all?" she asked.

"Each and every one," I answered as she went unresisting into the booster seat. After a silent thank-you to Mother Goose, I drove off. After singing along with her, and quite enjoying it, I was given permission to pick out the next CD, a medley of children's songs.

"'Old MacDonald,'" I said and slid it in.

After *e-i-e-i-o*-ing it through all the animals in the barnyard, I begged for a break.

"Oh, all right," she answered, "as long as you play the 'Are You Sleeping, Brother John?' song next."

I agreed, but first she sipped some juice.

"Okay," she announced, "my whistle is wet. Now we can sing again."

"Whistles are wet," I said, "who taught you that? Daddy?"

"No. Jeff did."

Jeff again. To keep from probing the child about Jeff, I quickly slid in the tape and my unconscious beamed up a disturbing word-play. Instead of the song's "morning bells are ringing," I sang, "warning bells are ringing."

Was I warning myself that Greg might have more than a friendship with this Jeff? The sight of the cabin surrounded by spruce trees and set near a cliff with a spectacular view of mountains haloed by an October haze swept anxieties away. This cabin held warm memories and would log many more, I hoped.

As soon as I unstrapped Melissa, she ran to the porch to hug Max, the smiling wooden bear my father had carved for my fifth birthday.

When we went into the retro living room—knotty pine panels and Early American furniture—Melissa ran to the glorious stone fireplace.

"Can we have a fire? Can we? And can we invite the bear in?"

"We can have a fire, but I think we'll have to wait for Daddy to bring the bear in."

Next Melissa and I climbed the stairs to the loft. When she opened the door to the smaller room, she squealed with delight. It was decorated in a Heidi theme: mountains, wildflowers, and a Swiss-type bed. She jumped on it and hugged the pillow.

Being in the bedroom reminded me of sleeping gear. Being new at nanny-hood, I had forgotten to get a suitcase from Greg.

"Sweetheart," I confessed, "I forgot to ask Daddy for your night things. And he might not get here until after your bedtime."

"That's okay," she said, fluffing up a pillow, "we keep pajamas and my extra Emma doll and extra toothbrush in my backpack in case I get tired in Daddy's office if he's working late. So if I fall asleep, Daddy carries me to the car and puts me to bed."

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"Smart Daddy," I said as another warning bell tolled. Had Daddy lied about the car not being ready today because he wanted a child-free night to spend with someone else?

Melissa's tugging on my arm steered me away from dark places.

"You said we were going to build a fire," she pouted.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go outside and gather some twigs for kindling."

After filling a basket with twigs, we tossed some onto the large logs already positioned in the fireplace. When the firestarter worked on the first try, we settled onto the sofa and watched the tiny flames mature into a blazing fire. Melissa clapped her hands at the sight and beamed at my suggestion that we eat our macaroni-and-cheese dinners in front of it.

After eating, Melissa snuggled close to me. I could love this child, I thought. Before she could fall fully asleep, I walked her upstairs, brushed her teeth, and put on her pajamas. After tucking her in, I started reading Emma's adventure with the playful platypus. By page five, she had fallen asleep.

I went downstairs and added more logs to the fire. The night had grown very cold. Sleet scratching against the windowpanes reminded me that winter comes early to the mountains. Since it was slightly after eight, I retrieved Greg's phone number from Melissa's backpack and tapped it into my cell phone.

He picked up on the first ring. Before I could say hello, he panted, "Who is this?"

"It's Anne." I laughed. "You sound, Mr. Lawyer, as if you've been chasing an ambulance."

"Anne who?" he choked.

"Anne who," I echoed calmly, preferring his playfulness to his initial panic and then answered, "Anne, the Mountain Maiden."

"How is Melissa?" he shouted.

I paused and tried to make sense of his mood. Acute separation anxiety, I concluded as he repeated, "How is Melissa?"

"Greg, calm down. She's fine. She's sleeping."

"She's not hurt?"

"Of course not. Oh, you must be worrying about the drive up here. We did fine and managed the hilly terrain quite well."

"Is she crying for me?"

"No, Greg. I'm sorry to disappoint you. I gave her dinner and read to her and she's sound asleep."

"So what do you want from me?"

"Just her clothes."

"You'll have to tell me where you are."

"In the living room of the cabin."

He dropped the phone. I heard rustling in the background. Rummaging noises? Looking for a pen? Why the need to write down the word clothes? But maybe he wanted to know more about the

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weather to include boots and rain gear. I heard a door close. Was Jeff there? Was Greg shooing him out?

Then I heard nothing.

Silence. A broken connection. I tried again and heard a busy signal. I paced the living room, waiting for a callback. Surely he had Caller ID. Minutes ticked by. Exasperated, I lay down on the sofa and pulled an afghan over me. Too tired to worry if his acute anxiety was a harbinger of our life to come, I fell asleep. And had a weird dream. Max, the wooden bear on the porch, had invited other wooden bears to a party. Their heavy paws thumped against the floor and one of them bumped against the switch next to the door, sending beams of light boring through the windows.

I tried to cover my eyes but a non-bear advised me to put my hands behind my back and told me I had the right to remain silent. As I tried to make sense out of this nightmare, someone ran past me and bounded up the stairs.

By the time I blinked my vision back I saw Greg rush past me, carrying the sleeping Melissa in his arms.

During the times when I'm not longing for the day before my arrest as a kidnapper, when I was attending to mundane chores, unaware that I was experiencing the best day of my life, I replay the story of my role in the perfect non-crime devised by Greg and his college roommate, Jeff—the oppo who had called me Machiavellian Mama. I marvel how I cooperated in my own victimization. Sure, Greg was clever and I was vulnerable. In the words of the tabloid—*Caught!*—I was a "lonely single longing for love and a child of her own."

Not included in *Caught!* was Greg's intense ambition to break into the political scene. He had the charm and the looks, but he also had a past, a past that would have been discovered by a skilled oppo like me. Jeff knew I would have tagged Greg out before he reached first base. To defuse me, Greg and Jeff, whom I totally underrated, systematically played me to perfection by throwing out the McKenna name to the party and betting that once I met Greg and learned his real name I'd be smitten and would not research him. The other part of their plan—establishing a relationship between Melissa and me so that she would be unaware of her "kidnapping"—evolved successfully in all the children's places we visited.

Blinded by my eagerness for time away with Greg, I walked blissfully into the trap—never doubting that his car had broken down; never suspecting that, contrary to what he said, Melissa would cry if he stole away without her seeing him; never turning off the children's CDs in my car to listen to the radio; never leaving the alternate route to go on the highway that flashed the Amber Alert; and never realizing that his strange "separation anxiety" was make-believe anguished parent-talk to a kidnapper for the ears of the FBI agents who simply needed to read Caller ID

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for my number and subsequent identification.

To ensure that Melissa was asleep when the raid occurred, Greg had to buy time at least until eight P.M. He rushed back into the library as soon as we pulled away and slipped into the role of distraught father. The librarian described me to him. As a delaying tactic, Greg offered up to the FBI the name of a freelance court reporter who had been friendly to Melissa. She also resembled me. After being shown a driver's-license photo of her, the librarian identified her as the kidnapper. Unable to contact her at the courthouse or home, the authorities immediately issued an alert. Not until six-thirty did a friend of hers inform the FBI that the woman was vacationing in Nassau, a fact known to Greg. That subterfuge gained Greg the time needed to wait until I called and told him Melissa was asleep. I also learned that an anonymous caller had dialed the Amber Alert number, saying that she had seen a car driven by a woman with a young girl who resembled Melissa go down Tamarac Road in the Mountain Top Development. The FBI learned my identity from my cell phone number and my location from the caller, most likely Jeff's new girlfriend.

No longer lacking face time and name recognition, Greg captured the hearts and votes of viewers as the scene of the father/child reunion played over and over on local TV. If Melissa had asked about me, no one could have heard her. Greg held her tightly and smothered her with kisses. Anything she said went into his shoulder. A teary-eyed interviewer cooed about "happy endings" before asking Greg about me.

He sighed. "The poor woman. I met her once at a cocktail reception and Melissa spilled juice on her skirt and apologized adorably. She must have fixated on her then and stalked us."

Melissa. I love that child and I wonder what Greg told her about me. That I went away like her mother did?

Eve visited me in jail and brought me a printout on Greg McKenzie.

"You should have let me check him out," she chided.

Aside from minor college hijinks like stealing the mascot of his alma mater along with Jeff, the incident that might have sunk his career had I found it occurred on a winding road in Colorado. Greg's car skidded and careened into a ditch, killing Melissa's mother. Suspecting drunkenness, the police on the scene advised the Midlothian Hospital medical personnel to test him for alcohol.

He was never charged. His blood test mysteriously disappeared from the hospital.

"Something so convenient arouses my hunter's instinct," said Eve. "So I checked the background of Jeff Cobb. Found out that he worked at Midlothian in maintenance while he was studying for his master's. Same time as McKenzie's accident. He quit the job the day after. McKenzie's sister-in-law and her husband petitioned

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the court for custody of Melissa, but were turned down. This data is useless now. He's got everyone so charmed that no one will care about the accident."

The knowledge of the accident and Melissa's mother's death would have impelled me to don my oppo hat and interview police, EMT responders to the scene, and hospital personnel and have them swear Greg was drunk. Machiavellian Mama would have vaporized his chances, but she was otherwise engaged.

Aside from Eve, my only other visitor was Will Stafford. He believes I'm innocent, but he chuckled in admiration at the "best damned oppo dirty trick" he'd ever seen. He's paying for my lawyer, who raised both eyebrows when I told him my story.

"Look, you say you went all those places with McKenzie and his daughter, yet no one's come forward who saw you with them. There's not one phone call from his cell or home phone to your cell or home. And there's only one call from you to him, from your cell to his home phone on the night of the kidnapping."

"Alleged kidnapping," I snapped. "We made arrangements when we were with Melissa. And he did call my office twice, once to set up our first date and again the day I picked up Melissa. I know the last call was from a pay phone. Isn't there a record of either call?"

"Yes, but there's no proof the pay-phone calls came from him. There's no proof of any connection with him or with the child, and she can't testify. Give me something concrete."

He called for the guard, then opened his briefcase and handed me some books.

"My wife went to your condo and picked up those books you asked for."

Wondering why I even asked for them since they belonged to the *day before,* I tossed them onto the bed in my cell. Ruefully, I watched as the volume of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets From the Portuguese* hit the floor. I had actually been reading those poems on the *day before* when my fatal romantic side held me captive. A white card bookmarked a particular poem. Masochistically, I picked up the book to read what I had once considered so meaningful.

I smiled. "Something concrete, you said. How about fingerprints?"

The card that marked my place was much more interesting to me than the poem. It was literally my ticket to freedom and perhaps Melissa's return ticket to relatives in Colorado who wouldn't manipulate her. It accompanied the roses sent by Greg as an apology for spilling wine on my skirt, asking me to lunch at McDougal's. And even better, silly old starry-eyed me had clipped a memento to the card. It was the receipt from McDougal's that Greg had left on the table. I had taken it for insertion into a future scrapbook to be labeled "Our First Meal Together," a romantic lunch consisting of one adult McDougal burger, one adult garden salad, and one child's Fun Meal. ●

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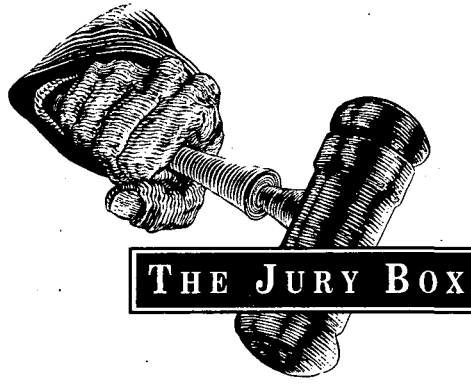

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

The great days of the post-World War II paperback original are the subject of much recent celebration, including old and new books in the style and format. The most prolific reprinter has been Stark House, which offers at $19.95 each two-novels-to-a-volume trade paperbacks by three writers who flourished in the '50s and early '60s and whose career crises in the late '60s and early '70s had varying outcomes: Harry Whittington, who made a strong comeback writing historicals as Ashley Carter; Peter Rabe, who became a college psychology professor; and Gil Brewer, who never stopped writing but lost a battle with alcoholism.

Whittington lives up to his reputation as one of the great noir storytellers in both *A Night for Screaming [and] Any Woman He Wanted,* a 1960 wrongly-accused-fugitive variation and a 1961 honest-cop-in-corrupt-city tale, respectively. A new introduction by David Lawrence Wilson and a reprinted essay by Bill Crider illuminate the prolific Whittington's career. Rabe's *My Lovely Executioner [and] Agreement to Kill,* from 1960 and 1957, show him the finest stylist of the three. Both man-on-the-run variants begin with the protagonist leaving jail, one by reluctant breakout, the other having completed his sentence, both headed for trouble. The first is a gem of pace, plot, and prose, the second much less compelling. A brief recollection by agent Max Gartenberg is joined by George Tuttle and Donald E. Westlake essays that recur from previous Stark House volumes of Rabe's work. Brewer was a lesser practitioner, but *Wild to Possess [and] A Taste for Sin* ($19.95), from 1959 and 1961 (the latter much the better), are not the soft-core porn their titles and cover illustration suggest, but rather studies of crime and obsession in the James M. Cain vein, often effective despite clumsy plot machinations and improbabilities. Publisher Gregory Shep-

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ard's new introduction is joined by previously published pieces by Bill Pronzini and Verlaine Brewer.

John Lange's 1970 Edgar-nominee *Grave Descend* (Hard Case, $6.99), a Jamaica-based nautical thriller with echoes of James Bond and *The Maltese Falcon,* offers crisp, fast-paced storytelling. (Though the book and accompanying publicity keep it under wraps, Lange was an early pseudonym of Michael Crichton.)

Meanwhile, the paperback noir tradition lives on, albeit mostly in hard covers.

**** Richard Stark: *Ask the Parrot,* Mysterious, $23.99. On the run following a bank robbery, career criminal Parker first becomes part of the posse searching for him, then aids a disaffected racetrack employee in a plan to loot the track's take. Stark (the best-known of Westlake's pseudonyms) began the Parker series in 1962. After a twenty-year-plus hiatus between 1974 and 1997, the series is stronger than ever. Stark/Westlake is a consummate master of crime fiction who can get a character in a couple of paragraphs better than many authors with a twenty-page dossier and can surmount any challenge, including writing one short chapter from the convincing viewpoint of a caged parrot.

**** Bill Pronzini: *The Crimes of Jordan Wise,* Walker, $23.95. To win the heart of a beautiful woman who wants to live on the edge with the finer things, San Francisco accountant Wise engineers a complex embezzlement scheme that allows the couple to escape to a new and carefree life in the Virgin Islands, until complications ensue. This is an extraordinary piece of pure storytelling, with the noirish mood, pounding narrative impetus, and unsparing character insights of the best 1950s Gold Medal paperbacks.

*** Max Allan Collins: *The Last Quarry,* Hard Case Crime, $6.99. Quarry, the first professional killer for hire (with the possible exception of some spy types) to front a series of novels, returns in a typically dark, funny, and compulsively readable adventure based in part on two previously published short stories, "A Matter of Principal" and "Guest Services." Is Quarry so amoral he will carry out his assignment to kill an attractive and well-liked young librarian? Added inducement: a great cover by iconic paperback artist Robert McGinnis.

*** Lawrence Block: *Hit Parade,* Morrow, $24.95. Another series hit man, John Keller, returns in a darkly comic short story collection disguised as a novel. At least some of these nine droll and sometimes oddly moving stories first appeared in *Playboy* or original anthologies, including several from Otto Penzler's sports-themed collections.

*** Peter Corris: *Taking Care of Business,* Allen & Unwin, $11.95. Australia's most famous private eye, Cliff Hardy, returns

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in eleven expertly crafted short cases concerning white-collar crime, seven from Australian periodicals, the rest new to print.

*** Hailey Lind: *Shooting Gallery,* Signet, $6.99. San Francisco artist Annie Kincaid, granddaughter of an accomplished forger of paintings, fronts one of the best new series in the Janet Evanovich tradition. The plot, beginning with a sculptor hanging from a tree, is just strong enough to support the humor, ranging from wit to slapstick, and the insights on creating, restoring, and authenticating works of art. But the author should watch the character names. The first few chapters give us Annie, Annette, Agnes, and Anthony, and later we meet both Pete and Pedro.

** Sarah Graves: *Trap Door,* Bantam, $22. The Home Repair is Homicide series features handywoman Jacobia "Jake" Tiptree, whose monumentally dysfunctional family includes an alcoholic son and a deceased ex-husband who haunts her 19th-century Maine house. The back story gets tiresome; the complex plot is totally goofy; and an unresolved paranormal subplot, presumably to be pursued in the next book, is annoying; but humorous style, interesting characters, household hints, and even some fair-play clueing compensate.

** Steve Brewer: *Monkey Man,* Intrigue, $24. Albuquerque private eye Bubba Mabry, a non-tough guy along the lines of John Lutz's Nudger or Parnell Hall's Stanley Hastings, is seated in a cafe with a zoo employee concerned about a higher than normal incidence of animal deaths when a person in a gorilla suit enters and shoots the prospective client to death. The case doesn't quite live up to its irresistible opening hook, but much of it is very funny.

The title of *The Rex Stout Reader* (Carroll & Graf, $16.95) suggests a more varied menu than what is delivered: two pre-World War I magazine serials, *Her Forbidden Night* (1913) and *A Prize for Princes* (1914), with an introduction by Otto Penzler. Don't look for Nero Wolfe or Archie Goodwin, but these early works will intrigue mystery historians and the author's most devoted fans.

One would think Wilkie Collins's classic 19th-century mystery novels, *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White,* better suited to the elbowroom of a TV miniseries than single two-hour versions. But the DVD pairing of two *Masterpiece Theatre* presentations in *The Wilkie Collins Set* (WGBH Boston, $29.95) offers superb productions of both.

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Art by Luis Perez

DOORWAY TO HEAVEN

by Frank T. Wydra

Another so-so day in paradise, dawn just breaking, drizzle clouding the view of the beach, temperature on the south side of eighty, me, feet propped on the rail, catching it all through the lanai, sipping my third cup of black. Fort Myers Beach is like that, day starts out kind of punk and by noon it works its way out of the depression and up toward the manic end of life. The beach is no more than a seven by half-mile strip of sand on the east side of the Gulf, which God put there to keep the natives' feet dry during high winds. Its real name is Estero Island, but somewhere along the way the real-estate agents figured they could make more money selling sand if they named the place after its big brother on the mainland, some would say swampland. I'm taking this all in, wondering if a few more hours of rays to add to my three-day tan is in the cards, when the cell rings.

"Hey, Matt," the scratchy voice says, "how ya doin'?"

"Hey, Ov," I'm back at him, wondering how I got lucky enough to have paradise put on hold, 'cause whenever Ovitz Marker calls, there's some kind of trouble. Marker is this client of mine in the Detroit area, place I hang when I'm not on the beach. Over the years

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I've done maybe a half-dozen jobs for him, mainly tracking down money that somehow slipped out of his pocket.

"You staying down here, on the beach?" he asks.

Down here? I check the window on the cell and the area is 313, but that doesn't tell me anything since all the cells are on Roam nowadays.

"Been here a long half-week," I said. "You too?"

"Hey, December through March every year. Can't stand the snow anymore. Y'know, get to be a certain age. Anyway, didn't call to talk weather. You got time we can get together?"

Frank Wydra's first novel, *The Cure*, received high praise from the *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly*, sold overseas, and went into a second U.S. printing. "Doorway to Heaven" is the author's first venture in short-story writing. Since selling the story to *EQMM* he has made its protagonist, P.I. Matt Jaxon, into the series hero of a new novel.

"Something sociable, yeah, I got time, have a drink or two. Otherwise, I'm on vacation. Y'know how it is, Ov, everybody's got to take a break."

"Let's do the drink," he says, "give us a chance to talk. What say the Beach-A-Doo at five. Catch the sunset."

"No business," I say. Ov likes to squeeze free consulting into a drink.

"Whatever," he says. "See you at five."

The Beach-A-Doo is every man's vision of a beach dive. Done up in shrimp and turquoise, the place looks as if it was designed by a pimp. Upstairs is the respectable part: dining room, every seat with a view of the gulf; terrace with a dozen Bimini umbrella tables; bar, long, coppered, with three bikini-topped tenders doing all drinks shaken, not stirred. Upstairs is where the gray-hairs pretend they're young. But downstairs, where Ov wants to meet, is where the locals hang. Here the bar is open-air so you can catch a whiff of salt and seaweed while you watch young bodies push a volleyball on a sand court. One corner is owned by a steel-drum band playing Carib tunes while most space is filled with picnic tables and benches. In the Beneath, as this level is called by the natives, the tenders and staff are just past legal.

I get there fifteen minutes past and Ov is at the bar chewing with a twenty-something tender, nursing a straight-up martini. Ov is a tad past fifty, but with the extra flab he carries and the hair slicked over his bald spot he could pass for sixty, easy. Little guy, though, decked in khaki shorts showcasing his knobby knees and broomstick legs and a black shirt with neon orange, pink, and green parrots. Ov doesn't like to draw attention to himself.

Seeing me, he shoulders a wave, then points to the stool next to

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his. The tender flashes whites and dimples pop to her cheeks. For a minute I toy with parking on the other side and seeing if there's a snag in the works, but Ov ends that with his motions, saying, "Matt, hey man, thought I'd lost you." He pats the stool and I sit, telling dimples I'll take a Jack-rocks.

"So, you're down here over the cold," I say, keeping it light. "Got a condo, or what?"

His eyes brighten and he says, "What I wanted to talk to you about. Got it in 'eighty-seven when the market tanked. Guy couldn't make the payment on his vig, so I took it in trade. Been coming down ever since. Started with maybe a week or two, then said, shit, who needs the cold. Nice place, two bedrooms, tenth floor, on the Gulf, little balcony. Not big, but I like it, all I need."

I sip the Jack, waiting for him to get to it, and eventually he does. "You hear about the guy who took a dive last month? Did a one-and-a-half from his condo, no water in the pool?"

I hadn't.

"Next-door to me. Same building, same floor, same view. Guy's a wheeler on the beach, but weird. Name's Rhodesia Sam, but everybody calls him Rhodo. Story is he comes out of Africa palming diamonds, starts buying up beach property like it's all that's left, mainly vacant lots but some run-down shacks, too. Anything, so long as it's on the water. Pays top green. We figure he's fronting for some rollers who are going to do a high-rise."

Ov orders another martini and we both watch dimples shake the can. Fresh juice in hand, he picks up where he left off. "Five, maybe six years, me and Rhodo are neighbors and nothing passes but how-ya-dos. This year, though, I come down like I always do, after Thanksgiving, and there's a hole in my wall. No shit, a door cut in between my place and Rhodo's. I'm ballistic. I grab Rhodo and say, 'What the hell's with the hole?' What does he do but give me a grin and says, 'Oh, that, sorry, I should have asked, but my mom was visiting and I wanted a place she could call her own. Privacy, you know?' My jaw's at my belt. 'You what?' I says and he says it again, same thing. Guy like this, you never figure he'd have a mom. Anyway, then he says, 'Tell you what, how about I buy your place? Pay you twice the market in trade.'"

Ov mouths one of the three olives from the martini. "Well, I like my place and selling's never entered, but 'twice' catches my ear, so I asks, 'What's it mean, in trade?' 'Y'know,' he says, 'I got some property's worth twice the market of your place. We swap. Trade. I get yours, you get mine.' Twice the market, right away I'm thinking extra bedroom, extra bath, not that I've ever needed them, but y'know, down here space is space, maybe even on the fourteenth floor with a wrap-around balcony, that's the kind of place you're talking at twice the market. So I says, 'This other property, tell me about it.' You should have seen the smile on his face. Two gold

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molars showed. 'You're going to love it,' he says. 'You're from Michigan, right? I've got this hundred-and-thirty-acre piece just above Gaylord, small lake on it and a cement plant.'"

Ov does the second olive. "I look at him like he's crazy, which the dive proves he is, but at the time I don't know he's going to play pelican, but I should have figured with the hole in my wall and all. 'Gaylord,' I says, 'Gaylord is in freaking Michigan. What are you talking about Gaylord and a cement plant? I thought you had something here on the beach.' I'm yelling at the sucker, but he just puts out his hands, motions me to calm down, gives me a smile like it's me who's the crazy one for not jumping at this snowball, and he says all over again, 'This place with the land, the lake, and the cement plant, this deal you don't want to pass up.'"

Down goes the third olive. "By now, I've got no doubt the guy's fifty-one short of a deck. Guy like that, you don't come right out and say it, 'cause no telling where he goes from here, so I says, 'Forget the deal and just fix my wall. While you're at it, paint the whole freaking room and don't pull shit like this again.' And that's the end of it. Can you believe? Next day drywall's up. Week later paint's on, everything back the way it was."

Ten years, off and on, I've been doing stuff for Ovitz Marker. Ten years every conversation has a problem lurking in it. So I'm listening to this wondering where it's going, because right now I can't see the thorn.

"Hey," Ov says to Dimples with a wink, "this here martini, you forgot the olives." Dimples gives a friendly little snort and impales four olives on a toothpick. Scarfing the first one, Ov says, "Aphrodisiac." I'm thinking Dimples ought to put the whole jar on the bar and let him go at them for all the good it will do.

"So," Ov says. "What d'y' think?"

What I think is that if I can get rid of Ov, there's still a chance with Dimples. What I say is, "A character."

"Yeah, well," Ov says. "It's a good story. But now the chitchat's over, maybe we can spend a minute on business."

I give him the queer eye. "Vacation, Ov, vacation. We don't do work on vacation."

Like I never said it, Ov says, "You got to help me with this one. Besides, knowing you were in town, I already passed your name to this guy and he wants to talk with you."

I push away from the bar. "Ov, I'm on vacation. Way I see it, what you got to do is go back to this guy and pass him another name. I'm out. And, so there's no hard feelings, here's a ten for the drink."

I'm walking away and Ov's yelling after me. "Your money's no good here, and the guy I told, he don't take no for an answer."

The sun's been up for a half-hour and I'm sitting on the deck, still in skivvies, feet propped on the table, trying to decide whether to

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bike out to Lover's Key or just walk to the beach, when a woodpecker raps on my door. Four days I've been here now, and this is the first time anyone, I mean anyone, has touched that door. "Don't need any," I yell, but the pecker does it again.

Pulling on some plaid shorts, I pad over to the door. On the other side is a guy wearing a suit coat and tie. Mormon is the first thing that flashes because on the beach nobody still drawing breath sports a tie. But somehow the guy doesn't look like a Mormon. They're always young, clean-cut, fresh-looking. This guy is anything but. More like used, cut-up, and ready for the trash bin. The suit is black, the tie is grey silk, and the guy standing behind the guy has at least ten inches on him and four on me.

"You Jaxon?" the little guy with the tie asks.

"Yeah," I say, "and whatever you're selling, I don't want any."

"Inside," he says, reaching up with splayed fingers to push my chest.

Now I'm easygoing, but one of the things that puts me off is short guys in ties pushing me on the chest and giving me orders in my own rented house. So I stand my ground and gently but firmly swat his hand from my chest saying, "Flake off, Charlie." This time the tree in the second row reaches an arm over the short guy with the tie's head and starts for my neck. Before it gets there I have the wrist in my paw pushing it upward so that he grabs nothing but cloud. But I don't get a chance to show off my kung fu or jujitsu because the short guy has a cannon stuck in my belly-button, trying to push it through to my spine.

"Inside," the guy with the tie says again, and this time I figure, why not. "Sit down," the tie says, sliding the Magnum back in his coat. "Treat all your customers like this, you're not going to stay in business long," Tie says.

"A," I say, "most of my customers don't pack. B, I'm on vacation, no customers wanted. C, my license's no good here. D, what's it to you?"

"Check it out," Tie says and Tree starts a tour of my palace. To me he says, "Who cares what you want? You talk to Marker? He's supposed to let you know I'm hiring you. He says he talked to you, last night. He talk to you?"

Ov's talk at the Beach-A-Doo slides back into my head and I roll my eyes. "Hey, I told him same thing I told you. I'm on vacation: rest, relaxation, no jobs. Got it? So thanks for thinking of me, but find yourself another boy. Now, if you don't mind."

The tie looks at me with a cocked head. "You're not getting this, are you? Nobody's asking you if you *want* the job. What I'm saying is that you're taking the job."

"Or what?"

"Or Ovitz Marker gets whacked. How's that for an or-what?"

I nod my head and give him a dumb look like I'm impressed. "Pretty good or-what," I say. "Thing you want to do on the way out

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is let me know where I should send flowers. Ov was a good client."

It takes a second, but eventually a smile works its way onto Tie's face. "You're okay," he says. "I like that. Most guys I know, give a little heat, they fold. Not you. That's pretty good. Hey, you know who I am? Marker tell you that? Who you're dealing with, here?"

"My guess would be Snow White and you left the other six dwarfs at home."

Again, he chuckles. "You got a good routine. Keep it up; I'll get you a gig at the Sands. But just so you know, I'm Al Capon." He says it so it sounds Italian. "And I run this town."

"And I thought you were dead. Figure that."

"You're thinking of the other guy. Scarface. Big Al. Me, I'm still kicking." He fishes a card from his pocket and flicks it to me and I see his name is spelled without the "e." Capon, French for castrated chicken. While I'm thinking of some cute remark the birdless bird says, "Now, let's cut the bullshit and get to it. I need my six mil back and Marker says you're the guy to find it. What I'm talking here is five percent finder's fee. How's your vacation now?"

I make good money; even so, the three hundred K catches my ear. "Nice number," I say, "but I'm not into contingent work."

Tree has finished his tour of my estate and takes his proper place one step to the rear and left of Little Al. "Okay," Capon says, "you get your fee with the five percent as a sweetener when you find the stash. Cecil, give him five K walking-around money." Cecil pulls a wallet out and starts fingering through what look like hundreds.

Sliced balls or not, the guy knows how to play his cards. "You've got my attention," I say. Man's in desperate trouble, even the best of us have to make sacrifices. "Tell me how this six mil walked out of your pocket."

Cecil hands me a pack of bills about a half-inch thick. They're hundreds. Capon says, "Marker told you about Rhodo, right?"

"Some."

"Well, I run some businesses here on the Beach. Mostly the pleasure kind. People come down here, they want to have a good time. I help them out. Natives, too. Anybody looking for a good time, they come to my people. Rhodo, he was my banker. By the way, I'm telling you this like you're my lawyer. This is privileged stuff. Goes in one ear, stays there. You understand?"

I shake my head. "I'm no lawyer, got no privilege."

"You're not listening," he says. "I'm telling you this is privileged. Talk in your sleep, I hear about it, your ticket gets canceled. After that you don't talk to nobody except maybe worms. So anyway, Rhodo, he's my banker, sort of. This business of mine, it's profitable. Yeah, we got expenses, but there's plenty left over. But regular banks, they got too many forms. Makes a guy nervous. Y'know what I mean? So, whenever I get some cash Rhodo converts my trading money into diamonds and what's left into real

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estate. You're asking why I'm telling you all this. Well, I send you on a hunt, you got to know what you're looking for. So that's it. The six mil is probably in cash, diamonds, or real estate. Rhodo, he's not talking, so you're the one who has to find it."

"This six mil," I say, "tell me about it."

"What's there to tell? It's gone and I want it back. End of story."

"It go all at once or over time?"

"Hey, pretty good. Now I see it. Over time. Last couple of years. I got this accountant and he gives me the high sign that what's going out doesn't add with what's coming in. Six mil and change, he says. I figure the change is probably expenses, so I round it. Still, six mil is six mil. So I asks Rhodo about it and during our conversation he slips over the rail of his condo." Capon gives Cecil a "you dumb motha" look and Cecil jukes his head as if his collar's too tight. "Accident," Capon says, "but I still want my six mil."

"Any idea where I should start looking?"

He gives me the same look he just gave Cecil and says, "If I gotta do the work, what'm I paying you for?"

As it was, Capon popped for two names: Rhodo's lady friend, Lulu, and a local real-estate agent who Rhodo used to buy property. They seemed a good place to start.

Lulu was somewhere between twenty and forty. With all the Botox and lifts going around, it's getting harder to peg an age. She was a model type with all her bones in the right place and just enough padding to make looking easy. If the sun hadn't bleached her hair, her dresser deserved an Oscar. I'm a sucker for a pretty face, so one look and she had me. Classic straight nose, ripe lips, high cheeks, brown eyes that had never been red. Face like that, some part of it had to have been paid for.

I introduce myself, including Jaxon with an X, then start to work around to business. Ten seconds into this spiel I made up, she says, "You working for Little Al?"

"Yeah," I said.

"He got you chasing that six mil he thinks Rhodo snatched?"

So much for privileged info. "Anything you can tell me about it?" I said, trying to stay cool. She gave me a head chuck and pulled the door for me to come in.

Her place was nice. Bigger than mine and better furnished, sort of contemporary, which you don't see a lot of on the beach. Not one seashell or picture of sand in sight. The furniture seemed to be all leather and chrome, neither of which does real well in the salt air. Enough money, though, it doesn't matter how often you trade in the old for the new. "Drink?" she asked and I gave her the usual.

After we were settled on this blue leather sectional—me on one end, her on the other—she says, "So, I suppose Little Al told you

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Rhodo scammed the six mil: cash, diamonds, or dirt."

"Something like that," I said.

"Give you five-percent finder's?"

I gave her a right-on cock of my head. "Five percent."

She laughed. It was a pretty laugh with a cynical undertow. "Pretty dumb, huh? Guy thinks someone finds six million, tax-free, no strings, untraceable, they're going to turn ninety-five percent of it over."

"Depends, I guess, on whether you do this as a business or a hobby. You think Rhodo took it, or what?"

Again she laughed. She was one of those women who, almost anything she said started with a little laugh or at least a smile. You know, the kind that win all the beauty contests. "It's gone, Rhodo took it. Man had glue on his fingers."

"Word is, you were his girl. That fit?"

The laugh. "Yeah, he gave me a lavaliere. We had it all planned, ten years from now we were going to get engaged."

"You two travel much? Business? Pleasure?"

The smile. "You don't believe I'm going to say, 'Yeah we went to Capetown once a month to buy diamonds or Zurich to check if they had the numbers right,' do you? Let me save you time, Mr. Jaxon with an X. Yeah, Rhodo and I traveled, but most of his business he did over secure lines. Yeah, we had a wide circle on the Beach and over in Naples and Bonita, but I can't think of any one of them who would help you. Most of them had no idea of the business. Most of them wouldn't have cared. No, I have no idea how he went over the rail. He wasn't the kind that likes high dives. You think maybe he was helped, go ahead and think it, I can't give you any help there. Do I know where the money is? No. Do I know if he converted it to diamonds or land? No. Do I know anything that can help you? No. Would I share it if I did? No. So there it is. Nothing I can do for you." And the smile never left her face.

"You mind, I finish the drink?" I asked. Of course, she laughed. I took a big one, but left a little in the glass for a chaser. "You meet his mom when she was down for Thanksgiving?"

If you were really paying attention, you would have caught the hesitation in her eyes before the smile and the little laugh. "What mom?" she asked.

Dimples, whose name turns out to be Suzy, was once again tending as Ov and I checked in for happy hour and the sunset. Ov looked a little nervous, as he should, considering how he set me up. We ordered the usuals and Suzy slid a bowl of giant olives next to Ov's glass. She was too smart to look as young as she was. "So, you knew about this?"

He gave me the bashful look, saying, "I'm into Little Al for ten gees."

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Second time I'd heard Capon called "Little Al" and here I thought I'd made it up. Go figure. "And," I said, taking the first sip of Jack, "the stuff about Rhodo, how much of that was the setup and how much God's truth?"

Eyes bigger than Suzy's boobs, he plays the innocent. "What I said? Yesterday? God's truth."

"Including him taking a voluntary dive?"

"Well," he says, stretching it longer than the seventh inning. "Some things better to be left unsaid."

"And you and Rhodo, most you ever said was a how-ja-do as you were getting on the elevator?"

Another "Well . . ."

"And you met his mom?"

This time he's shaking his head so hard the hair flap falls across his forehead. "No, no. Never said I met her, just that she was there. What Rhodo told me."

"He say where she lived, this mom of his?"

Another shake so the flap drops to his eyes and he has to brush it back, but it doesn't quite get to the right place so he looks like Dagwood. "No, no. Just what I told you."

"This mom wouldn't be named Lulu, would she?" And he looks at me like the gears in his head are slipping but still making time. "Forget it," I say because his look has told me everything I need. "You know a real-estate guy named Dan Brown?"

"Dan Brown? Sure. Who doesn't? Everybody calls him Crapper Dan, 'cause he's got this stomach problem, but he's the biggest sand peddler on the island."

"What say you and I go talk to Crapper Dan, see if he wants to show us Rhodo's condo, like I want to buy it."

He looks at me funny, like I'm not getting it. "He can't do that. The place is sealed."

"What sealed?"

"Sealed like by the cops. Y'know. They found some stuff in Rhodo's pocket. Coke, maybe. So they threw the freeze on it."

"So nobody's been up there since the dive?"

"Just the cops."

"And part of what Little Al does on the island is peddle powder?"

"I ain't saying that."

I look at him and, from the scared on his face, he doesn't have to mouth the words to make them so. But, one thing I learned about Ov, long time ago, when I was just getting started, is that he's got enough street smarts to be a sewer rat. "What's your guess, where Rhodo put the take," I ask, "stones, coin, or sand?"

"No-brainer," he says, "same thing everybody else thinks. Got to be stones. Property, too complicated with all the paperwork, deeds and such. Cash, too much bulk. You ever figure how many suitcases it would take for six mil? Book a passage on the Queen

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Mary, that much luggage. What's left is stones. Put six mil in your pocket, and he's got the connections at the rock farm."

He's right, I'm thinking. Only thing that makes sense. The little stash Cecil dropped on me, the lousy five gees, didn't take much space, but put together, what, twelve hundred of those stacks, adds up. And then I start doing the math trying to figure just how much space twelve hundred of those little five-grand packs would actually take.

I threw a twenty on the bar for Suzy and said, "Let's go."

"Where?" Ov says, as if missing the sunset would put him in purgatory for half of eternity.

"Find a preacher," I say, "maybe a six-pack of them."

It took most of the evening to find a half-dozen flock tenders willing to play the game. Not that we found any that weren't, but the beach is a small place and there aren't that many white collars floating around. We laid out the plan, set out the timetable, then left it in their hands. Each would go in in turn, do his bit, and exit. No overlap, no witnesses except Jehovah.

Ov and I made a trip to his place, where I had him make a mark on the wall where the door had been. The outline was thirty inches wide and six foot six high, a tad over nine thousand cubic inches in the cavity. We left the latch open and then went out to see if we could catch the sunrise at the Beach-A-Doo. Next morning, after a good breakfast, we check his place and call the police to report the vandalism. Party or parties unknown had broken into Ov's apartment and had ripped out a section of wall. Damnedest thing. There was almost no mess. The vandals were very neat; they'd even put the carved-up plasterboard in a little box ready for the trashman. Other than that, no damage, nothing missing. Gendarmes shook their heads, but wrote it up so Ov could file the insurance claim. I went out to catch some rays, figuring I'd only a few days left to do some serious skin damage.

End of the third day after the vandalism Capon calls and asks how I'm doing on the case. Not good, I tell him, no leads and the trail's cold. I offer to give him back thirty-eight hundred of the retainer, because this thing's not going anywhere. He says, "Keep working on it," so I say, "Okay," but I'm not planning to break a sweat. Yeah, a thousand went to pay the deductible on Ov's insurance and I figured we'd spent another two hundred on drinks at the Beach-A-Doo, so the thirty-eight was all that was left in the kitty. That I dropped off in a church box on my way to the airport.

In the cab to Southwest Regional, I read in the little Island paper, comes out once a week, about all these new drug prevention and rehab centers starting up on the island. Things the churches are doing, seems about a half-dozen of them got together, and I think it's good that the people in paradise take care of their own. I'll have to come back again next year; sure beats the snow in Detroit. ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

DEAD GRAY

by Keith Snyder

Wearing a dark bulky coat and a hat, carrying a small suitcase, Mr. Burke steps onto the porch. It's early evening and the clouds are moving.

The slip of paper in his hand says 1247 Maple Street. So do the gold letters on a black mailbox near the front window, and through its curlicue cutout gleams the white of an envelope.

The key is on a blue plastic tag. The door unsticks when he opens it: *snick!*

The living room is dusty and silent. Mr. Burke likes this.

He takes his hat off. Per a photocopied instruction sheet, he snaps breakers on, ignites the water-heater pilot, plugs in the fridge, phones the recommended pizza joint, the only one in town.

Unpacks his shaving kit, makes himself glance at the mirror.

Old.

He turns the light off.

Takes a pretty lace tablecloth from his small suitcase, spreads it on the dining-room table.

Mr. Burke has come to Long Island.

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Half a pizza goes in the fridge. Mr. Burke brushes crumbs into his hand, roams the kitchen until he finds the wastebasket under the sink.

Straightens the dining-room chairs, sits.

Brushes more crumbs off the lace.

Feels the white envelope gleam in the mailbox.

Looks toward the front of the house. Dark now.

Brushes more crumbs. Still in his coat.

Novelist, filmmaker, and musician Keith Snyder makes his debut as a short-story writer with the following haunting tale. He is, however, not new to the crime genre. In 2002 his novel *The Night Men* (Walker) was published to rave reviews. For the past few years he's been concentrating on film projects, including the 9-minute screen opera *Credo*, which has been in 15 festivals and won 5 awards.

Stars in the cold Atlantic sky. Mr. Burke stands on the porch. Here he is; here he's come. He looks out and up.

Hands in pockets, he shivers, turns to go in.

Nabs the envelope from the mailbox.

BURKE it says, typed. 1247 MAPLE STREET.

A black day planner, the day-per-page kind. Clipped to the inside front cover, a low-res printout: the face of a man in his late thirties, dark hair, clean-cut. Kind of a goofy smile. Underneath, the name *JJ Barnett* in an old draftsman's hand. Letter stems at identical angles like banner poles. Bowls and swashes precise. A curve-fitter's art, now extinct.

Mr. Burke sits on the edge of the bed, smells musty bedclothes.

He flips to today, Wednesday, March 16. In the draftsman's hand is the word *Arrival*.

With a diagonal stroke he crosses out the 16. One day down, all tasks complete.

He leafs ahead to Saturday the 19th, where the same hand has written *Contact*.

Puts the day planner on the dresser, stands to remove the old pistol from his coat pocket, sets it on the day planner so it won't scar the wood. Takes off his coat, his shoes.

The envelope gleams on the bed.

He washes his face, avoids the eyes of the slight old man in the mirror. Collarbone sticking out. White hair gone thin.

The envelope gleams on the bed.

He watches the old man brush his teeth.

Sits on the bed. Looks at the wall.

Sets his alarm.

Breathes out once. Opens the envelope.

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Four words on the first sheet, centered, typed:

PLEASE DON'T KILL ME.

Glances at the second sheet, doesn't read the single typed paragraph centered there. Already knows what it'll say.

Holds the two sheets in two hands, stares at the wall.

Folds them back into the envelope.

A Long Island Thursday morning of airy light. People know each other in a place like this, born, raised, and die all in the same house. Go to a local school, shop at a local store, marry a local girl. Get a local job, spend your life at it, all in one place. Not like a city, where a guy might be your neighbor if you see him twice a month at the train station.

Mr. Burke has waited near this pastel-blue apartment building since five, watched the emptying of a suburb into Manhattan, the daily flow of chatting neighbors onto the silver trains of the Long Island Rail Road.

The flow ceases by nine-thirty. The old pistol pulls his coat off-center, drags his shirt with it. The heat of the coffee is long gone. His fingers are icy. JJ Barnett pushes out through the glass double door.

He's big, must be six-two. Pink-rimmed blue eyes, two-day beard, and sweat sheen. Face a little pulpy, indistinct. A crumpled creamsicle-colored shirt of vertical orange and white stripes, hanging loose. Long sleeves. Not washed.

Not expecting company.

JJ never glances back, leads Mr. Burke to the local diner. Nearly empty. Circular wipe marks glisten on the tables in the beige light. Two waitresses killing time.

JJ sits at the counter, doesn't order like a favorite customer. Doesn't call the brunette waitress by name. She's efficiency in denim, slender neck graceful like a Jeep aerial, like a wind-bent rice stalk. JJ eats ham and eggs; no newspaper, no conversation. Eats and looks at nothing.

In a booth across the diner, staring out at the little Main Street in a big senior-citizen's baseball cap, Mr. Burke angles a little plastic camera on the table without looking at it. Visualize the vector, touch the trigger: *click.* Little sticker-photo of JJ slides out.

Sticks it in the day planner. Thursday, March 17. Labels it in draftsman's printing: *11:00 A.M.—diner.*

Crash and clatter—the blond waitress stoops to pick up shards of crockery. JJ's looking over at her too. Mr. Burke ducks under the brim of his big dumb cap, pretends to puzzle over the camera. JJ glances his way—then stands and pays, leaves.

Mr. Burke stands himself, watches the two waitresses so his face is away from the window as JJ passes outside. The brunette's helping the blonde clean up. He drops a few bills on the table. His heart's going like he's escaped death.

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"Sorry!" calls the brunette. The blonde's still crouching over broken dishware. "Need any change?"

Mr. Burke shakes his head. Needs to get after JJ.

"You gonna be back tomorrow? Coffee's on the house."

He waves on his way to the door.

"Promise?" He could swear she's being flirty.

An old man being ridiculous. He nods and shoots her a little smile and she flashes him a big one.

Inside the textured-glass brick wall of an off-track betting parlor is the arm of a striped creamsicle shirt.

Across the street in a little park, Mr. Burke sticks another photo in the day planner. JJ comes out looking tired, shoots his cuff. Sun flares off his metal watch.

PIZZA D-LITE, same joint Mr. Burke ordered his dinner from. JJ's the only customer inside, eats like he's waiting for someone.

Two men in black leather stroll in, stroll up to JJ, say a couple things. JJ grins, reaches back under his loose shirttail, pulls a thick envelope from his back pocket, offers it. That thug glances around, points to the other thug. JJ hands the envelope there.

Black leather. Some things haven't changed. Mr. Burke's across the street in the donut shop. The plastic camera goes *click*.

The second thug looks up from counting what's in the envelope, speaks to the first thug.

The first thug looks at JJ, who explains, still chewing.

There's a long moment. Then the first thug gives JJ a good-sport whack on the shoulder and everybody smiles except Mr. Burke, who knows what he's looking at even before the two men leave the pizza joint and cross the tree-shaded street for the donut shop, one of them already making the cell call.

He keeps gazing out the window when they come in. Just a useless old man in a donut shop. Angles the camera on the table.

"Two," says the thug on the phone, glancing into the envelope. "No, just two."

Click.

"Do it now?" says the one on the phone. His companion raises his eyebrows, does a little two-handed gun shimmy.

"You got it." Hangs up, says to the eager one, "If the new one doesn't work out."

They both look out at the pizza joint, where JJ's eating his slice. They buy coffee and leave.

Mr. Burke pastes pictures into his day planner. Writes "If the new one doesn't work out." Thinks about it. Draws a question mark.

He watches the light in JJ's apartment window until it goes out at midnight.

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The pizza comes back out of the fridge, the box goes on the lace tablecloth. Mr. Burke eats it cold, reviews today's photos, looks at the photos and the words "If the new one doesn't work out."

Draws a diagonal stroke through the 17. Two days until contact.

The day planner goes on the dresser. The pistol goes on top of it.

He unfolds the two sheets from the envelope.

PLEASE DON'T KILL ME.

Pulls the second sheet out from under it.

"If you kill me," reads Mr. Burke, *"I'll never . . ."*

Drops it on the dresser and brushes his teeth.

Mr. Burke looks up from the lace tablecloth. Pale flowers float in a small bowl. Sound of water.

He can't see her, only in agonizing flashes across the table. Beloved blue eyes. Beloved pretty smile.

Her hand reaches for his.

Friday, March 18th.

JJ leaves the same blue building in the same creamsicle shirt and leads him to the same local diner. Mr. Burke waits outside until JJ's got his ham and eggs, then goes in and sits in the same far booth. The brunette waitress comes out of the kitchen and her face lights up.

"Hey," she calls across the diner, and his pulse jumps and he ducks under the brim of the cap, but JJ doesn't look. "So tell the truth." The mug slides onto the table. "Was it the free coffee or did you come for something else?"

She's a third his age. The blonde ignores them both.

He smiles and points at the coffee.

JJ tears up his stubs at the same OTB parlor. Eats at the same pizza joint. The thugs in black leather don't appear.

Mr. Burke crosses out the 18. Tomorrow is contact.

Packs his small suitcase. Brushes his teeth.

Saturday morning and it's cold. Mr. Burke skips the apartment and waits for JJ inside the diner. As he sits, the blonde cruises by with the coffeepot. Late thirties, good age for a woman. A big blonde, tall, the type he used to like. Crucifix necklace and a sweet smile. The soul of the diner. There was a time . . .

He glances out the window, catches the eye of a transparent old man lying to himself. There was never a time. There was just the one sweet woman.

"Hey, you." Smile in the voice. "I need advice from a man of the world." The brunette waitress slides the mug onto the table. "It's for my girlfriend. She's got this guy who won't talk to her." Arches

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an eyebrow. "She says she's not going to force him to talk, and it's his loss." She leans close, looks him straight in the eyes. "What do you think?"

There's energy in this one. She intends grander things in other places. This town won't get her; she's young. A few tables over, the blonde is listening. He glances over; she glances away. Personal dramas are interesting. JJ could walk in and get interested too.

He's thinking how to end this when outside, JJ walks past and keeps going.

Mr. Burke fumbles in his pocket for a few bills, throws some on the table, grabs his small suitcase. Doesn't know how much he's put down—has a vague impression of a couple of twenties in the pile. Rushes past the brunette, hears an incensed "Hey!" behind him.

Bright outside. JJ's gone, but there's only one side street he could have taken. Mr. Burke glances back as he reaches it. Both waitresses are outside the diner, the blonde still holding the coffeepot, a clutch of bills in her other hand, tilted on one foot. Both looking the wrong way.

He takes the corner. A cul-de-sac: the local dry cleaner's, local hardware store, local liquor store. No outlet.

No JJ.

He whirls. The small suitcase hits his thigh. But no JJ behind him. No ambush.

If he's in one of these shops, he's going to come out and see Mr. Burke. That can't happen.

Cover, soldier.

He steps back to the corner, peers quickly around. The waitresses aren't outside anymore. He can see the brunette's back and hips inside, near the register.

JJ comes out of the dry cleaner's with a gray suit in plastic wrap. It's draped down his back, his thumb in the metal crook of the hanger.

Mr. Burke stands staring into a nearby window, not seeing anything. It's only JJ's switching the suit to his other hand, blocking his own vision, that takes him past Mr. Burke without eye contact. Inside the plastic, the hanger paper crinkles. Mr. Burke feels the breeze from it on his neck.

A barbershop near the pizza joint. The suit hangs in plastic from a coat rack. Old barber pole. Old barber. JJ gets a haircut and a shave, the haircut bringing his cheekbones into prominence, sharpening his whole face.

Across the street in the same donut shop, Mr. Burke throws away his wadded napkin, walks out with his small suitcase, checking his watch.

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He boards the Long Island Rail Road toward the city, rides one stop and gets off. Crosses to the other side of the track. Opens the small suitcase, takes off the cap, puts on his hat. Waits for the next train going back where he just came from.

Ten minutes to contact.

The old man steps off the train, peering up from the photo in his hand at the big, clean-cut man waiting on the platform.

The big man smiles. "Mr. Burke." He lopes forward. They shake awkwardly. The points of JJ's shirt collar sit over his gray jacket lapels. The jacket lining is pink. He takes Mr. Burke's suitcase.

They walk to a blue pastel apartment building, where a gardener unloads a lawnmower from his truck.

No clutter, warped baseboards. Bleak light from a thin-curtained window.

JJ sets the suitcase near the kitchen door. "You'll take the bed. I'll sleep on the sofa. Next time you visit, I'll have better accommodations. Dine out, or order in?"

"Let's stay in." Voice husky. Mr. Burke hasn't used it in a while. He sets his hat on one of two armchairs bracketing a little table under the window.

"We got a decent diner." JJ gestures at the chairs, goes into the kitchen. "Been here forever. Are you really hungry? The food's good, but they're the only game in town and they only got one delivery guy."

"That's fine."

"Great cheeseburgers."

Hesitation. "Good."

"Yeah," JJ says into the phone. "I want to order for delivery."

He turns, phone to his ear, to see Mr. Burke adjusting his coat and sitting. The pocket gapes open briefly.

Pistol.

He turns back around, faces away from the old man. "Yeah, two cheeseburgers." He gives the address and hangs up, comes back in, sits in the other chair. "About an hour and a half," he says.

Mr. Burke nods.

"So I guess you're my dad," JJ says.

"So they tell me."

"So they tell me too."

"DNA tests don't lie."

JJ shrugs. "Sometimes they do."

"Not usually twice."

"That's true," JJ says. "Not usually twice.

Nearby, a lawnmower coughs, then drones like a plane going down.

"Scotch?" JJ rises.

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"Yes."

From the kitchen, JJ says, "Rocks?"

"Neat."

The clink of cubes on glass. JJ returns with two square tumblers, gives the one with no ice to Mr. Burke. He sits. "I have to say, I'm still not used to this."

"I know what you mean." Mr. Burke inhales the vapor.

"I didn't even know they had that kind of service. Did you?"

"No."

"Two little tests, here we are." JJ raises his glass, waits.

Mr. Burke lifts his own. "Sweet women."

JJ smiles. "Sweet women."

"There is nothing sweeter."

They sip. The single-malt hits bottom and burns.

"'Our mobile testing lab comes to you!'" JJ quotes. "'Reunite with estranged . . .' something. It's truly amazing, isn't it? That you saw the same ad. Kind of coincidental."

Mr. Burke nods, sips again.

"Expensive service," JJ admits. "But . . . hey, compared to never knowing your family, what's two grand?"

Mr. Burke looks straight at him and nods briefly.

"Listen . . ." JJ pauses. "I know I said this already in my e-mail, but I don't want anything from you. I don't. That's not why I spent the money. I just wanted to know my people. Truth be told, I guess I didn't really believe they'd find a match."

The lawnmower cuts out. Suburban silence. Birds and dogs, the bang of a lawnmower basket against a dumpster, the scratch of a rake. The fall and echo of a train horn—the Long Island Rail Road scours through without slowing.

"Anyway, I was reading your e-mail again," JJ says. "You were on leave when you met my mother?"

"No. I was here for college. Just before I was called for duty." Mr. Burke puts his drink down, looks JJ in the eye. "I didn't know she was pregnant."

The lawnmower coughs again, drones again, moves away.

"After my discharge, I came back here. Her parents—your grandparents—they told me she was dead and they'd given my son up for adoption. They said I'd never see him."

"Did you love her?"

Eventually Mr. Burke raises his empty glass.

When they're both holding fresh drinks, he says, "Sweet women."

They sip. JJ says, "So you don't have any pictures of my mom?"

"No."

"But you did."

Mr. Burke shifts in his chair. The words have to be uprooted. "One day. We took the train to the old carousel. In Forest Hills. We

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wanted to take snapshots before I left for Basic. But it was cold. There was no one to take our picture. She took one of me and I took one of her. We had copies made. So we'd both have both."

"But you don't have them anymore."

"The one I took of her . . . ." Shake of the head. "Been twenty years. I had it all through my tour of duty. Then Comanche, Iowa, a water pipe breaks."

"What about the one she took of you?"

Mr. Burke points at the small suitcase. JJ rises and brings it over.

The photograph shows Mr. Burke in his twenties. Dark hair, slender, a boy looking tough.

Holding it, studying it, JJ murmurs, "My mom took this."

Pain stabs Mr. Burke's chest. He winces, considers his glass.

Hell with it.

Sips the fine single-malt. "I'll tell you my picture of her. She's sitting across a table. It's little scraps, little images. Her hand, her eyes. She had pretty blue eyes." He glances at JJ's. "There's a lace tablecloth she was proud of."

JJ places the photo on the little table. "So you were in the service?"

"Army Corps of Engineers."

"Nice gig," JJ says. "All the pay, none of the bullets."

Mr. Burke's eyebrows twitch. "Oh, you think so?"

"Yeah, pontoon bridges, right? Not warriors."

JJ picks up the photo again. He's looking at it when Mr. Burke says:

"You'd see a helicopter flying in. Dozer slung under it. Two seats on the dozer. One for the driver, one for a guy with a rifle. They'd start pushing dirt. Just these two guys, some infantry around the perimeter. A firebase was overrun, you'd have bodies everywhere. We'd push them into mass graves. The rats would swarm into the graves and feed. You're away from home that long, anything starts seeming normal. That's why they didn't let you go home on leave. You could go to Tokyo, but not back to the world. See anyone you loved. See anything normal."

He realizes how drunk he must be already. "My men were warriors."

JJ goes a little unsteadily into the kitchen, brings the bottle back, sits and pours. "That where you got the piece?"

Mr. Burke's glass stops halfway to his lips.

"It looked old," JJ says. "I thought it might be your service sidearm."

Mr. Burke puts the drink down, shifts in the chair to tug the pistol from the folds of his coat pocket. "You didn't keep your service sidearm." Looks at it lying on his palm. Black and ugly.

"All the bodies, there'd be weapons scattered all over the place.

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Pick up an officer's pistol, trade it for two-three cases of scotch. Then that guy brings it home. Like a war trophy. Tokarev T-33. Russian-made VC officer's pistol."

"You got it off the ground?"

"No."

JJ waits.

"Sometimes," Mr. Burke says, "a guy you thought was dead. He'd pop up. Take a shot."

JJ points at the pistol.

Mr. Burke nods.

. . . realizes how long ago he stopped talking. Blinks up from the Tokarev, unclenches his hands.

"You killed him?"

Mr. Burke still blurry. Clears his throat, doesn't answer.

"This is the gun of your assassin."

Mr. Burke's chin jerks up. His eyes focus and find JJ. He grins.

"Why's that funny?" JJ says.

Mr. Burke shakes his head, takes his sip, smiling. It's funny.

JJ indicates the gun, a question. Mr. Burke unloads it, slides the magazine into his pocket, hands it over. Waits half a minute while JJ shows reverence, then takes it back.

"You carry it loaded?"

Mr. Burke slips it into his other pocket. "I just told a story. Your turn."

JJ looks away, reaches for his drink. "I don't have a story."

"Everybody's got a story."

"Don't kid yourself." Drinks, rattles the ice. "Do I look like her? You'd think I would. 'Cause I sure don't look like you."

Mr. Burke studies him. "First I don't see it, then I do, then I don't."

JJ turns his empty glass between his big fingers. "Why'd you wait this long to find me?"

As he's practiced, Mr. Burke says, "At that time I had no rights."

"My grandparents lied to you," JJ says. "When you came back from Basic? No one adopted me. I was bouncing around in foster homes till I was eighteen. After that I was on the street. Finally came back here. Nobody leaves this place."

"In those days I had no rights," Mr. Burke says. "I had no rights. I searched for you but I had no rights."

JJ's eyes narrow. "Why look again now?"

"You get to a certain age," Mr. Burke recites. "And now this Internet . . . people can find each other. If they want to." Thinks, nobody leaves this place. Thinks of her.

JJ studies him. Then relaxes.

"Which we did," he says.

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The sun through the closed curtains is a little lower. Mr. Burke takes the lace tablecloth from his suitcase.

JJ gapes.

"No," Mr. Burke says. "It's not the same one. I bought it in Hong Kong, long after I found out she was gone."

JJ raises the nearly empty bottle and Mr. Burke drapes the folded tablecloth on the little table, watches JJ put the bottle down.

Pain shivs up inside his chest. His vision blurs, but he doesn't wince. He sits. "It makes me feel like she's been here. It's something I would never do, so she must've been here. In this room. She must be in the next room."

Across the lace tablecloth, JJ's blue eyes fix him. JJ's hand reaches across with the bottle. Sound of the scotch pouring.

It's so like his dream that Mr. Burke gasps. Rattled, he blurts, "You're in trouble."

"What do you mean?"

Mr. Burke slides his day planner from his inside coat pocket, uses his thumb to point at the photo of two thugs taking JJ's money at PIZZA D-LITE.

JJ stares at it.

"I've been here three days," Mr. Burke says. "I got here early. I saw you with those men."

"You took pictures."

"At a certain age they're more reliable than your memory."

JJ holds the day planner, his eyes flicking from photo to photo too fast to comprehend anything. "I don't . . ."

"I'm old. Old people die. In my case, it's a bad liver. Doctors won't say anything you could sue them for. I asked him if he was me and wanted to take a trip, would he wait a year or take it in two months. He said he wouldn't wait two months." He takes the day planner from JJ's hand.

JJ's looking at him, at the day planner . . .

"So you want . . ."

"Just to know you. Nothing else."

"You've been watching me for three days."

"I'm sorry. I don't have time to get to know you slow."

JJ nods, eyes still panicked. Says distractedly, "So why don't you just get a transplant or something?"

"They won't let you on the organ-donor lists if you like your scotch." Another hot stab of pain. Bad one. Knows he's gone pale. "I'll never know you as well as I'd wish to. But I know you're out of your league with these men."

JJ's mouth opens. He closes it.

"Maybe I can help," says Mr. Burke. "How much?"

JJ abruptly scratches his ear. Starts to reply, stops.

"Quarter mil," he says.

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"Qua—" A low whistle. "You have a story after all."

JJ's not looking at him. "I'm not gonna finally meet my dad and drag him into my problems."

"What family's for," Mr. Burke says. "So I hear."

"Got a quarter mil?" JJ looks at him, lets the silence answer the question. Rubs his knuckles. "I'm not comfortable with those pictures being out there."

"They're not out there. They're in my pocket."

"I don't know."

"I'm an old man with two months to live. You think I'm gonna spend that time getting my son in trouble?"

A jarring electric buzz. JJ rises and presses the door button on an intercom near the kitchen. They wait for the diner deliveryman to make his way to JJ's apartment. JJ folds and unfolds his arms, clears his throat. Mr. Burke feels it as a rising pressure.

JJ breaks and says, "I—" and the knock comes.

"You bought the booze," Mr. Burke says. "I'll get this."

To give JJ time to bleed off some of that building pressure, he asks for too much back from the slender Middle Eastern man, forces him to start the transaction over. Feels JJ's pressure behind him, still building. *Bleed it. Take longer.* Messes up the tip amount, says wait, calls the guy back, gives him another dollar. Manufactures a comedy with the bag and the money, not enough hands.

The pressure doesn't bleed. The door closes. JJ's got a look to him. "I need those photos."

"Smells good." Mr. Burke smiles.

JJ shakes his head, and Mr. Burke sees himself, an old man who's played it wrong.

"No need to get excited, son," he says, and it detonates.

Mr. Burke between the wall and JJ's solid body. Bag of cheeseburgers spilled on the floor, JJ's big hand taking the day planner from Mr. Burke's coat. Perfume smell from JJ's haircut, JJ's forearm compressing his neck against the wall.

JJ takes the pistol and the magazine, steps back, day planner between his teeth, eyes darting.

Mr. Burke rubs his neck, breathing hard, sees how far the door is, sees the magazine not yet loaded into the pistol. Thinks about how far he's come. Sees JJ panicking.

"Okay, son."

JJ's hand jerks up with the pistol, the magazine still in his other hand.

"I'm just gonna sit down."

JJ tracks him with the unloaded pistol. His suit is five years out of date. The forty-year-old Tokarev is the wrong vintage in his hand.

Mr. Burke drops into the chair. Odor of cheeseburgers. Realizes

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he hasn't heard the lawnmower in a while. The lawn outside is cut, maybe edged. "Give both of us time to think," he says.

JJ notices the magazine, slides it into the grip. Examines the gun, racks the top back. Takes the day planner from his teeth, puts it inside his jacket, wipes his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Son, I don't know what you're into—"

"Yeah."

"—but I know the look of a man in over his head."

"Yeah." JJ backs into the kitchen, takes the phone down from the wall.

Softly, "That's a mistake, son. Let me—"

JJ raises the pistol. Mr. Burke falls silent, and JJ crosses the living room, stretches the telephone cord, puts the chain on the door. Back in the kitchen he dials, turns away. Top of the phone handset visible at his ear. Line of pale, damp skin at the back of the new haircut.

Soft murmuring, a glance back.

Hangs up, comes back, sits in the other chair. Eyes darting.

"Son—"

JJ stands, aims the pistol straight down onto the top of Mr. Burke's head.

The Long Island Rail Road rumbles. Nearby, the creak and slam of a screen door.

"I'm dead in two months, boy. You got nothing to scare me with."

JJ's breath shallow.

"Who'd you call, son?"

"Shut up."

"You called those men. From the pizza place. You think you're in business with them. Those men are going to kill you."

JJ makes a sound that's supposed to be a laugh.

"The envelope you gave them had two in it. Two grand, two hundred. Whatever. Two wasn't enough. They made a call, asked for permission to kill you. Take out my day planner, I'll show you."

JJ stares at him.

"I'm half your size, I'm unarmed, and I'm old."

JJ steps back warily. Takes out the day planner.

"See them calling? See the guy making guns with his fingers?"

" 'If the new one doesn't work out'?"

"If the new one doesn't work out, they kill you."

JJ goes white.

"What's the new one?"

Nothing.

"How long till they said they'd be here?"

"Twenty minutes."

"How do you want to spend your last nineteen minutes?"

Nothing.

"I know what a grave smells like, son. Either we both leave—"

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JJ drops the day planner on the little table. The gun comes up again.

"—or you start talking, or you die." Mr. Burke sits back.

"Why would you help me?"

"You're stupid, but you're my son. Eighteen minutes."

JJ studies him.

"Maybe less."

JJ scratches his ear. "I started my business on credit cards."

"Good."

"Hundred thou. Zero percent for the first year."

"First year runs out, you're at what, nineteen percent?"

"Thirty. I was right on the edge of breaking even."

"What kind of business?"

"X-ray supplies and stuff. Health support services. You know. Tongue depressors, Q-Tips."

"How does that business work?"

"We don't have time."

"Talk fast. Or let us leave."

JJ looks at the curtains. Takes a breath. "There's doctors. They own clinics. They give you an order, you give them a C-note. Everybody knows the kickback, it's a C-note. These doctors start saying this other guy, he'll give them two C's. First I say no, but . . . "

"Business dried up."

"I went two C's. The other guy went two-fifty. I went three. My expenses went through the roof. I knew his expenses had to be going through the roof, too. I knew in my heart if I could just outlast him . . . Then the credit cards called in their loans. They were going to take everything. I went to this guy."

"How much did you borrow?"

"Hundred K and change to wipe out the credit cards, another sixty 'cause if I wanted the edge, I needed to get more mobile."

"More mobile?"

JJ peers through the break in the curtains.

"Yeah. I bought a mobile unit." He turns suddenly from the window. "I mean—you know, it was a van. It did give me the edge. I dropped the kickback down to one C, but the doctors still called me because they got their stuff faster."

"Seeing as we're dead in fifteen minutes," Mr. Burke says, "let me speed this up. The other guy got a van too. So you've got the same problem you started with, only now you owe a quarter mil. What was in the envelope you gave them?"

"I put some aside out of what the guy loaned me. In case I needed it for payments."

"It used to be five dollars per hundred dollars per week and you never had to pay down the principal. Still?"

"Yeah." JJ's gaze flickers toward the curtains.

"Your calculator break? That's two hundred and fifty percent

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annual. Twelve grand a week forever."

JJ leans in, intense. "I knew in my heart."

"So you owed them twelve grand, and you showed up with two. The last of what you'd put aside because you're so smart. Was this week your first short payment?"

No answer.

"And now they want everything, not just the interest. You don't have a choice. You have to liquidate."

"I did." JJ changes gun hands long enough to wipe his right on his pants.

"Yeah. 'Course you did. And I know who the buyer was. How many cents on the dollar?"

JJ breathes deeply, looks out the window. "Five."

"So . . . seven grand and change. Which they keep. And they own the business, so you can't use it to make money. JJ, you idiot." He rises, paces. JJ lets him. "What's a loan shark want with a company that can't sell a Q-Tip without dropping three bills?"

Something odd about JJ's shrug. Mr. Burke frowns. "What was that?"

JJ shakes his head, shrugs again, peers through the curtains.

A tickle, a thread. Mr. Burke doesn't know what it is yet.

"Where's the profit? Throwing C-notes at every order, plus now you've got a van to maintain." Stops. "Why'd a delivery van cost sixty th—"

The tickle widens to a white flash that blinds him, floods his limbs.

. . . doesn't order like a favorite customer. Doesn't call the brunette waitress by name.

Loses where he is. *Cover, soldier!* Can't breathe. *Snap out of it, old man!* Get practical. Pull in some air.

Steps to the chair. Lets himself down into it. JJ steps in, raises the pistol, holds it steady a foot from Mr. Burke's forehead.

"You didn't buy a delivery van," Mr. Burke says. An old man who's been played. "You bought a mobile testing lab. 'Our mobile testing lab comes to you.'"

The gun steady.

Mr. Burke passes a hand over his face, breathes tiredly. "So. How does this work? You put an ad on the Internet, someplace where people are trying to find each other. It says you do DNA tests—'Our mobile lab comes to you!' Some sucker bites. You send somebody out in the mobile lab, swab my cheek, pretend to find a match for my DNA."

The gun steady. Mr. Burke closes his eyes, tracks back through the weeks. "You send the lab out again to 'verify.' I get e-mail and a picture from you, pretending to be my son. I come out to meet you." He closes his eyes. "You weren't slacking and playing the ponies because you were despondent. You just weren't scheduled to be in character yet." Opens his eyes. JJ's suit looks like a costume.

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The scotch glasses are props. "I'm not rich. Where's your profit?"

The gun steady, JJ's eyes half-lidded. "You're crazy, old man."

Mr. Burke studies him. "Old man. Might have an estate. Might be worth something. Find my son, change my will. All you have to do is wait for me to—"

The gun wavers.

Mr. Burke nods. "No reason to wait. Pretty soon I fall down some stairs." Closes his eyes briefly. "The new one. I'm the new one. The new one doesn't work out, they kill you." He smiles without anything in it. "You thought they needed you to run the scam. But they don't. And you just called and told them the new one didn't work out. And where you are. And that you'll wait here. With the new one that didn't work out."

JJ's breathing fast. A different thing occurs to Mr. Burke. He savors it, smiles for real. Wants to explain that he's not smiling at JJ's stupidity, but now he's laughing, and JJ's pulling him from the chair, raising the pistol high, face dark. The laughter is so violent he can't force words out, can barely keep his eyes from squinting shut.

The pistol crashes against his temple, and he's on the floor, his vision red-black.

(Her pretty hand.)

JJ's standing bent over him, a blur, white hairs stuck to the pistol as he roars. Mr. Burke gasps, thinks he's going to vomit laughing so hard, tears stinging, head throbbing, funniest thing an old man near death has ever thought of.

"Ah!" He hears his suffocated laugh. "Ah! Ah!" Between asthmatic wheezes he tries to speak. JJ raises the pistol again, whips it down against Mr. Burke's face, splits his cheek open.

(I'm sorry, my darling.)

JJ hauls him up, roars *what?!* and Mr. Burke's sucking air like a fish, pointing with a shaking finger at the little table. JJ drops him, spins, snaps up the day planner. "This?"

Gasping, eyesight blurred. "Back," he croaks, makes an urgent flipping motion. Minutes left. If that.

JJ pulls out a folded piece of yellow paper. Mr. Burke nods, points, sucks air.

JJ unfolds it. Finds the word at the top. "Transplant." Looks down at Mr. Burke. "You said you couldn't have a transplant."

"Couldn't be on the list. Still get one from imm—" A rogue upswell of laughter knocks away the end of the word. "Immediate relative," he manages, and a shrill giggle hangs in the air, and then there's silence and wheezing. His lungs and head are splitting; the pain shivs his chest again and he moans.

JJ rereads it. Frowns at it.

Shocked horror dawns. "You wanted my liver?" JJ looks up. "You wanted my *liver?*" Amazed pain in the voice.

Seems like a long time goes by, JJ still just standing there. JJ's

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going to kill him. No point lying. No point telling the truth.

I just wanted to know my son.

"Doesn't matter," he whispers.

"You're a dirty con man." Yellow paper hanging from JJ's hand. "You're no better than me."

"Doesn't matter. Neither of us has two months anymore."

JJ stares at him. Seems to click into something different and cold. Looks at his watch. Crouches.

"This is the gun of your assassin."

Mr. Burke nods, watching him. The end of the barrel nestles in. "This about where your liver is, Dad?"

A little fragment of fear, not too bad. "That's it."

JJ shoots him.

JJ lets the yellow paper go, and Mr. Burke watches it flutter down toward him, watches it flutter . . . then JJ in silhouette in the open door, pretty tablecloth in one hand, Tokarev in the other . . . and then just the empty doorway.

A silent ballet of illusion and memory.

Her pretty hand reaching out to him, and doctors look down into the gurney and move their heads in unison. Watery lights—nurses float like kelp around the room.

(JJ shoots him.)

An ocean of beeps and alarms.

(Her pretty blue eyes.)

(A child's voice: *Daddy!)*

(The type he used to like, crucifix necklace and a sweet smile.)

There was never a time. There was just the one sweet woman.

(Please don't kill me.)

I hope I drown.

Bed tilted up slightly. Bald doctor with a clipboard.

"Vitals look good. If you don't get hit by a truck, there's no reason you can't live another twenty years."

"Some doctor you are," Mr. Burke whispers. "I've got—"

"I know what you got," the doctor snaps. "You got your transplant, is what you got."

Mr. Burke blinks. The doctor hasn't looked at him once. "You had a bullethole in your liver. There was a DNA match. The paperwork was right there, all in order. Your doctor told me why you're not on the lists."

"I like my scotch."

"Like it less. I put half a perfectly good liver in you." Bangs the clipboard into its holder, hard. Takes a videotape from a large manila envelope, drops the envelope on Mr. Burke's legs. Something's still in it. "When you're done with this, I'll bring the cops in."

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Gives him a remote. Slides the videotape into the slot in the wall-mounted TV. Stops at the door.

"It was a blood clot." Halfway out the door he stops, finally looks at Mr. Burke. Looks like he wants him dead.

Then leaves.

Mr. Burke lolls back fogged and disoriented in an empty room. Mechanically he tries to comprehend the remote. Arrows and icons on rubber buttons.

The TV screen lights, the tape already playing, started rolling when the doctor inserted it.

The blonde is familiar but he can't place her.

"Hi, Daddy."

Toying with her crucifix necklace.

"They say we're a match."

She knew him on the stunned second look, the tray falling from her hands, and when Tina knelt to help, she whispered, *That's my dad!*

Oh my God! Tina whispered. *He's leaving!* Standing. *Sorry! Need any change? You gonna be back tomorrow? Coffee's on the house.*

Tina wouldn't leave her alone about it. She went home to find the old photo.

She holds up the photo of Mr. Burke, dark-haired and young. There's one of Mom, too, she says, and shows him the lost photo he hasn't seen in twenty years. They could be sisters.

(Was it the free coffee or did you come for something else?)

"She left me her diary," slipping the photos into it. "She only used your first name. Grandma and Grandpa told me you were dead. They didn't mean badly . . ."

(My girlfriend. She's got this guy who won't talk to her.)

And then it came back to her that she was a practical girl. This was silly having her friend speak in her place. She opened her mouth but before she could get a word out he dropped a ridiculous amount of money on the table and bolted.

She searched for an hour. Still carrying the stupid coffeepot. Went back to work, and then Mohammed, blasting in from his deliveries: Show me that photo! Two cheeseburgers! Couldn't get his money right!

She got the address. Found the apartment door ajar. Took a breath, steeled herself to dress him down.

Called an ambulance, applied pressure. Practical girl.

"If you're watching this, I guess something went . . ." She toys with the crucifix again. Tries to smile.

"I believe God wouldn't have let me save you before if I wasn't meant to save you again now. Maybe it's why he kept me in this

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town all this time." No more smile. "I've always missed you, Daddy. I love you. I hope you love me too."

The tape goes to static.

In the manila envelope is the diary, two old photos inside.

He lowers his bedclothes, raises the hospital gown.

Touches the staples.

Wails like a child.

"One last thing and I'll leave you alone."

The detective is in a chair by the bed. The bald doctor hovers. Gloom outside the gray hospital blinds.

The old man under the bedclothes doesn't respond. The detective unfolds two photocopied sheets, reads from the top one.

"Please don't kill me."

Waits for a response. Reads from the second page. "If you kill me, I'll never see another sunrise. I'll never be kissed by another sweet woman, never drink another fine scotch. If you kill me, I'll never eat another good steak, never breathe fresh air. If you kill me, I'll never know my son."

The detective waits.

The bedclothes stir. "Letter I wrote." Voice rusty. "Mailed it to myself. When I came here."

"Why?"

"Stop me from shooting myself."

"You have a gun?"

"No."

"You have a son?"

"No."

The doctor clears his throat. They've covered this. The detective ignores him.

"Why did you come here?"

"Just looking for a reason not to die."

The doctor moves closer. The detective glances at him, nods reluctantly, rises.

Hesitates.

"Did you find one?" he asks.

Gunmetal clouds moving outside the diner window. An unfamiliar redhead floats by with the coffeepot.

Diary in his inside coat pocket, photos clipped inside. Videotape in his outside pocket. Envelope, stamp, sheet of paper on the table.

Takes up his pen. In his draftsman's hand, he writes:

IF YOU KILL YOURSELF,
YOU KILL THE LAST PIECE OF HER.

In his coat and hat, carrying his small suitcase, Mr. Burke stops at a mailbox. The envelope is addressed to BURKE. He mails it. ●

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PERSONAL SPACE

by Jerry Sykes

As soon as I turned the corner I could see that he was there again, the third time this week. Sitting at the curb in his battered red Sierra, just staring out across the street.

I had first noticed him a couple of months back, flipping between the *A-to-Z* on his lap and the terrace houses on the far side of the street. He had been around a number of times since then, as much as three or four times a week, but he still seemed to be looking for that elusive something. It was clear that he wanted people to think he was looking for a particular address, referring to the map and then squinting up at signs and numbers, and it might even have worked for that first week or so, but after two months I was sure there was more to it than that.

Give or take a car-length or two, he was often parked in the same place, sometimes with the engine running, sometimes not, just a couple of doors down from the house where I lived alone.

I had never seen him get out of the car and so I had no idea of his potential, but from what I could make out from just walking past, he was in his late thirties with pink jowls that suggested he carried a little too much soft weight and was therefore not too much of a threat. At first I took him to be a sad sack of a man who couldn't handle a change in his circumstances, his girlfriend ditching him for someone with a bigger wallet or something, but the longer he kept on appearing at the curb, the more it dawned on me that he might be some kind of head case looking to inflict serious retribution. I knew that it could not be me he had in mind because he had seen me often enough and still not made a move,

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but the more I saw of him the more I began to resent him being there and encroaching on my personal space.

Personal space is a strange concept. Subjective and elastic and the one thing that if it is not quite right can nail me to the ground in righteous anger just as sure as if I had been struck with lightning. I just cannot bear to be in too close contact with someone other than through choice.

I don't mind pushing onto the tube in rush hour because that's what it's like, that's the space, and it's not as if there are one or two people down at one end of the carriage while the rest of us inhale each other's odours at the other end. But if I'm out walking in the park and the sole other person for miles around is close enough for me to be able to hear them breathing, then as far as I'm concerned that's tantamount to stalking.

Back when I still used to go to the cinema, I would sit and wait until the film had started before I took a final seat, moving as far from the munchers and chatterers as possible. But no matter how careful I was, a few minutes into the film, without fail, a small group of people would enter the cinema with their loud voices and their loud food and sit right in front of me. No wonder I can't remember the last film I saw at the cinema.

And this kind of behaviour is not just confined to customers, either. In restaurants I often make sure that I am the first person there, taking a table in a far corner where no one can intrude on me. But as soon as someone else appears, each time the waitress will sit them at the table right beside me, ignoring the rest of the clear tables in the place. As if not understanding that having them so close to me and having to listen to their conversation will do nothing but irritate me.

And no matter what time I leave home for work in the morning, someone from down the street will have stepped out of their front door just in time to be able to trail me down to the tube station at a distance of no more than a couple of feet, the sound of their feet and their breathing polluting the air.

None of this is natural, of course, this cramming people together, this people wanting to be crammed together. No, the need for personal space is one of the most basic laws of nature.

I remember an experiment concerning Brownian motion back in school, Mr. Burke lighting up a filterless cigarette and blowing smoke into a glass-topped wooden box. The smoke particles didn't gather in one corner of the box, or in clumps, but spread out evenly to fill all the available space. This is a law of nature, a lesser one, perhaps, and one akin to nature abhorring a vacuum, but a law of nature nonetheless. Simple and logical. So what's the problem with human beings sticking to it?

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Coming home from work one night a week later, the sight of the red Sierra at the curb again filled me with such a raw frustration that I knew it was time to confront the driver.

A little warmth had leaked into the spring air and the driver had his window wound down, his forearm resting on the lip of the door. I slowed a little as I approached, and as I came up close I stopped short and took out a pack of cigarettes. He glanced at me for a fraction of a second and then returned to the *A-to-Z*. I put a cigarette to my lips and then made a point of tapping around my pockets for some matches. After a couple of moments I stepped up to the car and leaned down to speak.

"Sorry, I don't suppose you've got a light, have you?"

He turned to look at me with a blank face, folding the open pages of the *A-to-Z* into his chest as he did so. "You what?"

"A light," I repeated, the cigarette bobbing in time.

"I don't smoke," he said.

"All right, thanks," I said, removing the cigarette and pointing to the *A-to-Z* with it. "You looking for somewhere?"

"Just . . . y'know," he shrugged, peeling the *A-to-Z* from his chest and glancing down at it. I could not see what page it was open to but I would have put cash on it not being the one for the area around here. "I was looking for a friend," he continued. "He lives around here and as I was in the area, I thought . . ."

"You know his address?" I said, leaning forward a little.

He smiled a grim little smile. "That's the thing," he said. "I know it's around here somewhere, but as soon as I turned off the main road I remembered that I didn't have it with me. I thought I might be able to find it with the *A-to-Z*, but . . ."

I straightened and looked up and down the street, being helpful. "You at least remember part of the street name?"

"No, it's all right," he said. "Some other time, perhaps."

"You want to tell me his name?" I said. "I've lived around here forever. I might know him, know where he lives."

"No, it's all right," he repeated, firmer this time.

I stared across the street for a long time, making a point of just standing there, remaining there. I could hear him fidgeting with the *A-to-Z* and muttering under his breath. After a couple of minutes he fired up the engine, put the car in gear, and pulled out from the curb. I waited until he had turned the corner and then continued on home.

A couple of nights later I rounded the corner to see a traffic warden in the middle distance walking towards me. It was also the first time the red Sierra had been back since I had spoken to the driver. I do not own a car and so most of the time I do not notice these much-maligned creatures, although if truth be told I have a sneaking admiration for them and the blind rage that their pens

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can inspire. Mightier than the sword indeed. But as soon as I saw this particular one peering at permits in windscreens, a fat man in his late forties dressed in a uniform that looked as if it belonged to his much slimmer brother, an idea that had been formulating for some time became clear.

I increased the pace so I met the warden before he reached the red Sierra.

"Excuse me," I said, putting on the flustered breath.

He looked at me with lowered lids, disinterested.

"Me and the wife live just up the road here," I said, pointing over his shoulder. "The house with the blue door right there. We've just been to Homebase, the DIY store, to get a stepladder to help out with the redecorating, but we haven't been able to find a parking space down here and so we've had to park up on the main road. She's up there now, the wife, waiting for me to call and tell her she can come and park nearer the house." I paused and took a deep breath. "Thing is, I don't want to make a fuss, but there's a car without a permit down here that's been there over fifteen minutes now. I wouldn't ask, but the wife . . . "

It was enough to get him going. He gave me a thin knowing smile and nodded once to let me know that he had understood. I stood aside and watched as he approached the red Sierra. As he stepped up to the driver's window, the man looked straight ahead and caught me looking back at him. A crimson tide coloured his face and the muscle along the side of his jaw pulsed in anger.

Back upstairs I watched the street from the kitchen to see if he would return, but even after the warden retired for the night there was still no further sign of him. I remained at the window looking out for a long time, thoughts adrift on the night. I had seen enough TV cop shows to know that the police could trace people from the time and place of their parking tickets. That it was almost as good as CCTV in pinpointing someone's location at a particular point in time. I thought of those TV shows where the lead character had a contact in the force and could find out in minutes the owner of a car and his address from the registration number. I wondered for an idle moment if I knew someone with those kinds of connections but knew as soon as the thought appeared that it was a rhetorical question. . . . I thought of all these things and, watching people walking up and down the darkening street with their mobile phones clamped to their ears, or held out in front of them, thumbs working overtime, of how the world was getting smaller. Of how people could no longer bear to be alone, apart from others, different from others, forever checking their mobile phones or their e-mail to see that their crafted character was still on the radar. Wanting to be running with the pack,

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in constant touch, part of the global village. Afraid of being themselves, of being an individual.

What had happened to create this dull mass of humankind that struggled to maintain a cultural pulse? Where were the flashes of colour, the sights and sounds that lit up the heart and fired the blood? Where were the individuals capable of creating a neon orchid in the darkened swamp, something that could send our lives into glorious freefall for a few minutes upon just hearing or glimpsing it for the briefest of moments? What had happened to the things that made life worth living?

At the first door there was no answer. At the second an old man shouted at me through the door to leave him alone. The third one opened on a woman in her late thirties with her hair pulled back in a ponytail. I said hello and then pointed down the street to the red Sierra. "I don't know if you've noticed him before, but that man's been hanging around here for a few weeks now," I said. "I don't know, I might just be being paranoid, but I don't think you can be too careful. . . . You don't think he could be a burglar, do you, checking on people's movements to see when they're out?"

She looked at me with a curious frown, and then took a step across the threshold and looked over towards the Sierra. She squinted a couple of times, and then stepped back into the house. "I don't think I've ever seen him before."

"You're sure about that?"

She nodded, uncomprehending.

"Yeah, all right, thanks," I said, and turned to go.

I followed this routine for a couple more houses, each time doing the best I could to make sure that the driver of the red Sierra could see me pointing at him. Of course, I could not be sure that he could see me—I could not see his face for the bright reflection on his windscreen—but it was not difficult to imagine him getting angrier with each door that I knocked on.

Ten minutes later I was almost at the end of the street and he had still not emerged from the car. It was clear that I had not connected with his target. I was beginning to think that I had misjudged the situation when I saw a woman in her late twenties pushing through the last gate in the street. She was not striking, small with mud-coloured hair, but she did look familiar. I was sure that I had seen her before, but not enough for her to have made a lasting impression. Thinking that she could be the last chance, I raised a hand and called out.

"You mind if I have a word . . . ?"

She gave me a flutter of a smile and shuffled further up the path. I noticed a little scar on the tip of her chin.

I took another step closer, and then hooked a thumb behind me. "I don't suppose you know if the man in the . . ." I stopped as I saw

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her pupils flare to black, an injection of fear. She was not looking at me but at a point in the closing distance. I turned to follow her line of sight and saw the driver of the red Sierra bearing down on us. On his feet he looked far different than he had sitting in the car, more menacing, bulkier, darker.

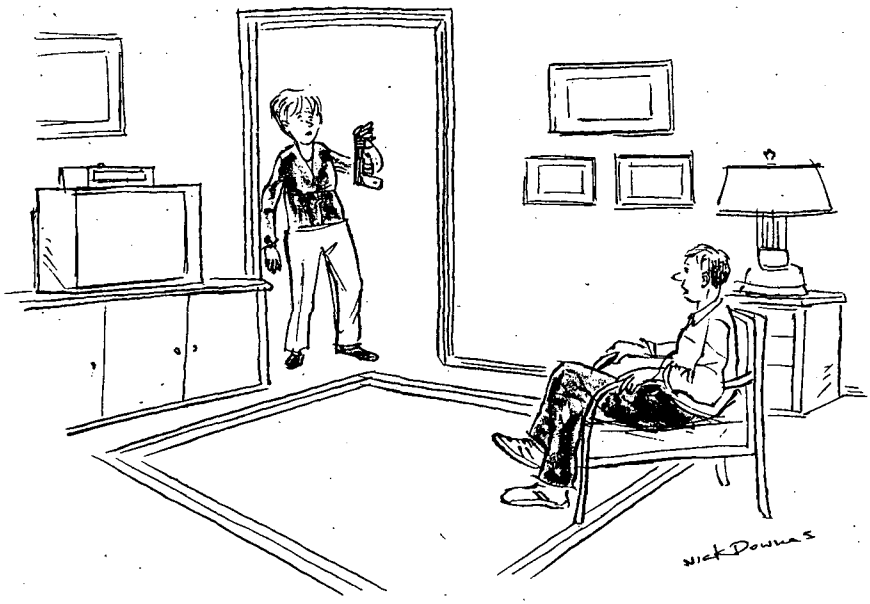
"John, no," the woman cried, backing further up the path. "You know you're not supposed to come this close . . ."

I stepped to one side, unsure of what to do. I did not want to get stuck in the middle of a domestic, but then I was not so sure that I could just stand aside and see the woman get hurt.

But it was not her that he was after.

"You little piece of shit," he snarled, and punched me in the stomach through a weak shield of fingers. I felt a cold bomb erupt inside me, and when he hit me again I glimpsed the flash of steel in his hand. The third blow caught me in the ribs, and when he withdrew the knife his hand was covered in blood up to the wrist. I was too numb to feel the fourth blow as more than a weak pat on the stomach, and I did not feel the fifth blow at all.

I have enough personal space now. There is no chance that someone else will get too close. Until our coffins rot and the movement of worms through the earth shifts the bones of the person buried beside me up close to mine. To share a final resting place with the bones of someone else. That must be the definition of hell. ●



"I wish you wouldn't go through my pockets, Darlene."

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Death at Delphi

by Marilyn Todd

Most readers know Marilyn Todd as the author of a series of mysteries set in ancient Rome, starring female wine merchant Claudia Seferius. But she's always been fascinated by the Delphic Oracle, so this time she decided to change her setting to ancient Greece and write a mystery surrounding the oracle. Her latest novel is *Sour Grapes* (Severn House/'06).

Smoke, grey and nauseous, swirled round the temple. Laertes recognized bay, hemp, and barley grains among the ingredients, but there were others, rich and exotic, that were foreign to him. The heat of the charcoals on which they smouldered fused with the heat of high summer.

Still breathless from the tortuous climb, Laertes bowed before the priest.

"I—"

What should he say? *I have an appointment?* It made him sound as though he were a common civil servant, not head of an army, and besides, the priest already knew why he was here. Laertes had registered his petition, paid his (truly exorbitant) fee, and purified himself at the Castalian Spring, all of which was noted in the oracular records. As indeed was the gold statuette, which had propelled him to the front of the queue.

"I have sacrificed a white goat," he told the priest. "Its entrails—"

"Suggested favourable omens. I know." The priest smiled as he bade him lay his armour aside. "Come," he said. "Come with me, and together we will summon the spirit of Apollo, that He may answer the question you lay before Him."

Ushered deep into the building, Laertes felt the world he knew slipping away. Gone were the crickets that rasped in the scrub, the butterflies that flittered over the cushions of wild thyme on the hillsides. Gone were the jangle of harnesses, the scrape of boots on the march. Even the sunshine was no more, for in the world of the Oracle, oil lamps flickered and strange odours danced. Music came from everywhere and nowhere. Not the music of clashing swords that Laertes was used to, nor the blare of battle trumpets. This was a soft, haunting tune made by lyres and flutes, that spoke of death, and of life, and of dreams . . .

From the shadows, two acolytes stepped forward in well-

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rehearsed unison. Boys of twelve, maybe thirteen, dressed in the same long, flowing robes as the priest.

"Drink," the priest said, but when Laertes turned, the man was gone. In the distance, he could see small chinks of daylight. They seemed far, so far, away.

The first acolyte handed him a goblet on which the word "Forget" was engraved. The drink was wine, and Laertes drank. Then the second youth passed him a goblet on which the word "Remember" was etched. To Laertes' mind, it tasted the same. With spirals of smoke coiling round his head one second, his feet the next, they steered him towards what looked like a gaping hole in the floor. Squinting cautiously, he could see nothing but darkness below. The acolytes motioned for him to sit, then retreated in silence, taking their torches with them. Even as he'd prepared to face battle, Laertes had never known his heart beat so fast.

How long did he sit there, dangling his feet in the Stygian blackness? A minute? An hour? Time had no meaning in the world of the gods. For was this not the site where Apollo slew the dragon snake that had raped his mother when she was pregnant with him and his twin sister, Artemis? Alone in the timeless void, Laertes set to wondering for the millionth time how best to phrase his question.

Then he was falling.

Tumbling through nothingness, with his arms flailing wildly, since the smooth stone denied him a grip. Down, down he spiralled, funnelling into the blackness. In his struggle, his forehead made contact with rock, then he found flagstones cushioned with reeds. Dusting himself down, his soldier's eyes searched for the hands that had tugged at his ankles. It took only seconds to realise that his only companion was a statue of Apollo—

"Welcome," a voice echoed. It was thin and crackled with age. "Welcome to the world of answers and truth."

Making the sign of the horns, Laertes traced the sound to a narrow entrance over which "None May Enter" was written in gold lettering. From the doorway, he peered into a small inner sanctum lit by the dim flame from a tripod. Its flickering light revealed a solitary female, veiled and seated upon a stool.

"Welcome to the point where heaven and earth and east and west meet. The navel of the world, that is home to the Oracle."

What had he been expecting? An old woman, to be sure. Wisdom went hand in hand with age and prophesy, and he remembered now that the previous sibyl's trance had turned her into a wild animal, thrashing and groaning as she frothed on the floor, to die only a few hours later. Would that happen now? Listening to drumbeats and doves cooing curiously close-by, Laertes was transfixed by the frail figure bent over her tripod, still dressed in the wedding robes of her marriage long ago to long-haired Apollo. To his shame, his strong limbs were trembling.

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"Dost thou wish to enquire of the Lord of Light and Prophesy, whose arrows of knowledge shine into the future?" she quavered.

"I do."

"Art thou pure of body and heart?"

"I am."

"Then Apollo will speak to thee through the vessel of my body. What is it thou wish to know?"

"My question . . ." He cleared his throat. He was a general, after all. A commander of men. "My question is this."

His mouth was dry. Was it the smoke, the vile smell, or the fact that this was the first time he had voiced his intentions so bluntly?

"The king who rules the city-state from which I come is a weak man. He puts the good of himself before the good of his people, and I want to know if . . . if . . ." The words did not come easily. ". . . I move to unseat him—"

"Whether thy campaign will succeed?"

He didn't feel better, now it was out in the open. His heart still pounded harder than a blacksmith's hammer on the anvil. "Yes," he said eventually.

"Then shall ye know."

With a twirl of her wrist, an explosion erupted from the tripod, a flurry of sparks flew into the air. Then she hugged her arms tight to her chest and began rocking back and forth, keening softly. Swaying himself in the abominable heat of this underground tomb, Laertes watched the flames from her fire reflect in the Pool of Prophesy at her feet and sensed the past and the future fusing together. It wasn't only the crack on his head, he thought, that was making it throb.

Time passed. The Oracle rocked, wailed, muttered, and reeled. The flames in her tripod guttered and died. In their place, smoke, white and sweet, welled from the walls, from the floor, from the ceiling. Laertes' tunic clung, sodden, against his skin.

"When a guest of wood doth pass through thy portals . . ." When she spoke this time, it was not in a voice tremulous with old age. This voice was low, deep, and even. ". . . then must thou build a city of metal walls and woollen roofs, and set it beside the dancing pebbles."

The sweat on his back turned inexplicably cold.

"Sacrifice in this place a creature that makes both music and food, and I, Apollo of the Lyre, will surely march at thy side."

With a jerk, she slumped forward. The drumbeats fell silent. The cooing of doves ceased at once.

"Leave me," the old woman quavered, and her voice was so weak he had to strain to hear it. "Leave me, for I am spent."

Perhaps he should have thanked her, but she seemed barely conscious, so he turned, and the last sight was of her thin breast rising and falling with unnatural rapidity. He did not understand the riddle, but as he clambered up the rope ladder that had been lowered through the hole he knew there was a priest in the temple, a

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seer called Periander, who would help him unravel the mystery. With the seer's help, and with Apollo's, there was no doubt in his mind that his revolt would succeed.

Tumbling back into the real world, Laertes was positively breathless with relief.

Below, in the underground sanctum, the Oracle threw off the veil that filtered the fumes and stretched her slender arms high.

"How many more?" she asked the wall.

The wall parted, spilling a thin finger of light into the cavern. "Five," the young man said, consulting his scroll by the glow of his candle. "Though none of the other petitioners require such elaborate theatre."

"Good. I was half-choked with that smoke."

"You were?" The young man laid his drums aside and squeezed through the gap in the false wall. "When you tossed those herbs into the tripod and set off that explosion, I had to pinch my nose to stop myself sneezing."

Cassandra smiled with him. "Next time, I'll stow a smaller bunch of borage up my sleeve, but at least Laertes should have no trouble interpreting the riddle." She pulled off her old woman's mask and blotted the sweat off her face with her sleeve. "I made it simple enough, I thought."

When a guest of wood doth pass through thy portals—in other words, when a ship enters harbour—that's the time to *build a city of metal walls and woollen roofs*—i.e., set up camp, since soldiers use spears to support their blankets. And if this didn't make it plain that this undertaking should be conducted in the spring, when the seas opened once more for trade, *beside the dancing pebbles,* she had added firmly. It wouldn't take much working out on Laertes' part to understand that this meant when the first snowmelts cascade down the mountains, and as for sacrificing *a creature that makes both music and food*—well, what other animal's flesh is succulent when roasted and shell makes the perfect soundbox for a lyre but a tortoise?

"Laertes is a soldier, not a politician, my love." Jason began to knead the muscles in her neck that tightened from hours bent over the tripod. "Men like him think in straight lines. Not too rough?"

"No, that's lovely," she purred.

"I'll bet you a chalkoi to an obol that Laertes heads straight for Periander." He moved down to massage the knots in her shoulders. "He's the very sort who needs a seer to solve the puzzle for him—and ho, ho, talk of the devil."

An older man in ankle-length robes, whose craggy face was softened by a beard, shinned down the ladder with the skill of a ship's rat.

"Father!" Cassandra embraced him warmly. "What a delight-

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ful surprise!"

She hadn't seen much of him over the past six months, and he had never, in her recollection, come down here to see her. Was this because she was too engrossed in her new appointment, she wondered? Or because the memories that this sanctum held were too painful for him?

"Did you solve the riddle for our rebellious general? Because all in all, I thought it went rather well," she decided.

The admission fee, the costs of purification, one gold statuette, plus, what? a silver wine cup, perhaps, for the seer's deciphering. Traitor or not, the Delphic Treasury would welcome Laertes back anytime.

"I suppose, Cassandra, that depends how one defines the word 'well.'" Periander's eyes were grave, but then they always were. "Laertes collapsed at my feet."

"And?" she cried.

"And he's dead," her father said quietly.

Ever so softly, Night threw her cloak over the mount of Parnassus. Flexing the stiffness out of her legs, Cassandra paced the portico as, one by one, the priests and attendants made their way home to their wives and their supper and bed. The last of the petitioners was long gone, the temple swept with purifying hyssop in readiness for tomorrow, and the only sound that broke the silence was the grinding of bolts as the sanctuary was locked up against thieves. She paced and paced until only the creatures of darkness prowled the Sacred Way that zigzagged its way up to the shrine. Fox, jackal, hedgehog, and caracal. They moved from shadow to shadow.

Dead? How could Laertes be dead?

In the Pool of Purification, she saw a young woman with hair blacker than a raven's wing and eyes darker than an adulterous liaison. Plunging her hands into the cool, clear water, Cassandra splashed her face with her own reflection.

With the temple physician laid up in splints after a fall, there was no one to confirm or refute the cursory diagnosis that cause of death was a weak heart. Several witnesses testified to the chills and sweats that Laertes experienced beforehand, but then most supplicants suffered similar effects at the prospect of coming face-to-face with the gods. As for being breathless after his consultation, there was nothing unusual about that, either. The higher a petitioner's status, the harder the temple worked at disorientating him, because farmers, for instance, eager to know the most auspicious time to plant their beans or bring in their harvest, were far less worldly than kings or insurgent generals. Deeply religious, highly superstitious, the peasant folk believed with all their hearts that Apollo's spirit spoke to them straight through the mouth of the Oracle. They didn't need further convincing.

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But a crown is not held in place by thin air. Kingship requires plotting and scheming, travel and trade, just as it requires war and diplomacy. Such sophisticates are not easily fooled and are even less likely to trust. Hence, the magic that is brought into play.

Senses manipulated by darkness, by narcotic fumes, by strange, haunting music. Rituals take on even greater importance. The petitioners are passed from one priest to another before they are able to take stock of their surroundings. They're given goblets of wine that will supposedly make them forget everything except the focus of their question yet remember clearly the Oracle's prediction. Then they are left alone to commune with the gods, and who would imagine that an old woman's hands could grip their ankles and drag them into the void? Disorientated by their fall every bit as much as the blackness, they do not see the old woman hurry back to her stool. But—! (And it was always possible.) One of these days, this chicanery might just bounce off their defences. In which case, keeping the petitioner outside the inner sanctum, where there was no possibility of him seeing that the face was a mask, was essential.

As indeed was the Oracle's constant monitoring of the supplicant's body language and expression from beneath her veil . . .

High overhead, Hercules wielded his olive-wood club and the moon rose full and white through the pines. Cassandra sat on the steps of the temple and buried her head in her hands. Weak heart be damned. While she was teasing Laertes with her riddles, what she had mistaken for nervousness and disorientation were, in fact, the symptoms of a man who was dying. Dying in front of her eyes.

And manifesting all the symptoms of poison.

"Jason." She had to shake him twice to rouse him. "Jason, wake up."

When he saw her, fully dressed and her hair still pinned up, he was on his feet in an instant. "What's wrong?"

"Laertes was murdered," she explained, while he pulled on a tunic. In the lamplight, his skin shone like bronze. "I need you to go down to the temple mortuary."

She did not need to elaborate. Women, even the most important woman in Delphi, were forbidden to set foot inside.

"Examine his body, check his eyes, his skin colour, look in his mouth, his ears, under his nails, then report back to me on your findings."

She was pretty certain she knew what had killed him, having ruled out corn cockle, since Laertes had suffered no abdominal cramps, while aconite would have had him throwing up, and with hellebore he'd have been salivating like a rabid dog. Other poisons were either too slow or too fast and so, given the time frame in which he died, Cassandra concluded that only belladonna could have taken his life. But confirmation would not go amiss.

"I love you, I adore you, I would give my life for you," Jason said,

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combing his tousled hair with his hands. "But frankly, my darling, I'd rather face the Minotaur in Hades than ask the Keepers of the Vigil to stand aside while I poke and prod their dead charge at this ungodly hour of the night. What excuse am I supposed to give them?"

"I have absolutely no idea," she said, smiling in spite of herself. "But you did so well today, with the drumbeats and doves, that I'm sure you'll come up with something."

The invisible doves of prophesy were Cassandra's idea, but the drums and the white smoke had been Jason's. All it needed, he'd insisted, was a bowl of hot water and some terracotta pipes to filter the steam. Delphi, after all, was founded on the principle that the quickness of the hand deceives the eye.

"Ah, the birds." He clucked his tongue. "I wasn't sure it would work," he admitted. "I feared blocking the light from my one tiny flame would make no difference when I threw the sheet over their cage, but bless you, my love, you were right. They stopped talking at once."

"I wish you would," she said. "We have so little time."

"Why the hurry?"

She pressed her lover's hand in urgency. "I'll explain later," she said. There wasn't time now to go into why she needed to unmask Laertes' killer during her first trance of the morning.

"For you, O Prophetic One—" He kissed her lightly on the nose—"I will borrow Hermes' winged sandals and fly like Pegasus himself."

Watching him sprint across the courtyard, she thought it wouldn't be the first time that the Oracle had delivered a prophesy only for it not to come true. Accuracy wasn't essential. Had Laertes died trying to overthrow his sovereign, it would only prove that, although Apollo had been with him, Zeus or Poseidon had sided with his opponent. When it comes to gods battling it out, no one argues.

In addition, many riddles were deliberately open to misinterpretation. Some for political reasons. Some because bribes had been passed (the Treasury was no slouch when it came to filling its storehouses). And some because, quite simply, Cassandra had no idea how to answer. Thanks to the meticulously maintained library of files at Delphi, she knew who the supplicants were, where they came from, the political background. But there was never any advance notice of their question.

And today the Oracle had quite clearly foretold that Laertes would set up camp beside the river next spring.

The Oracle could not afford to be that wrong.

Outside, Selene's silver light spilled over the rooftops, bathing the theatre, the shrines, the fountains in silver as bats squeaked on the wing. With a thousand city-states constantly at war with one another, Delphi remained spectacularly neutral. In fact, it thrived on optimism, Cassandra decided as she waited for Jason to

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return. And it was her job to keep it that way. Without optimism, one tiny shrine could not have grown into the most prestigious religious centre in the world, bursting with treasuries, overflowing with marble, and where eight hundred statues stared out to sea. Thanks to its oracles, a federation of small (and otherwise insigificant) city-states had grown to become the most powerful council in the Greek world. Today, it was not so much a case of consulting the Oracle as obtaining sanction. Kings would not make war without it.

But Cassandra was only one link in the chain and, incredible as it may seem, not even the most important.

If anything happened to her—and the sibyls had a curious habit of dying in agony—there were other girls trained to step into her bridal robes and take that famous seat over the tripod. Girls like her cousin Hermione, for example, who'd been primed to take over, had it not been for Cassandra's outstanding aptitude for deception. She smiled in recollection. The Governing Council, always eager to stock a new treasury, revelled in the fact that each new generation brought fresh ideas to the role. Cassandra's proposal to enclose her lover, Jason, behind a partition to add to the drama cast poor Hermione into oblivion.

"Great Zeus, what are you doing out alone this time of night?"

She spun round. "Father! You frightened the life out of me!"

Grey eyes stared solemnly at her in the moonlight. She tried to remember the last time he'd smiled, but could not. "Can't you sleep, child?"

"Can't you?" she retorted. Like her, he was still in his day robes.

"The death of those carried young to the Elysian Fields is tragedy beyond measure," he said sadly. "To have them die before one's eyes is a burden greater than Atlas, who holds the whole world on his shoulders."

Periander wrapped one arm round her shoulder and squeezed. Together father and daughter watched the moon dance on the sea.

"We old folk find consolation in the knowledge and wisdom that comes from maturity, but it is always the young that we envy, Cassandra." He sighed heavily. "You have so much to give." He placed a kiss on the top of her head. "So much to lose."

She watched him walk away, stroking his beard in thought, though it was only later, much later, that she realised he wasn't talking about a young general collapsing dead at his feet.

He had been talking about Cassandra's mother.

What befell Periander's wife befell most of the Delphic prophetesses. One day the Oracle was sitting in her sanctum, dispensing riddles as usual. The next, she was a gibbering wreck. Drooling, moaning, writhing, screaming. She saw visions—terrible, marvellous, hideous visions—but these were the visions that killed her. Slowly and painfully, they would torture her to death while she

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frothed at the mouth, suffered spasms, amnesia, until the final convulsion came as a blessing.

Cassandra was just a baby when her mother had died. She only ever knew her through her father's memories, but from what he told her, she would have loved her. They shared the same dark hair and eyes, he said, the same sense of joy and laughter.

"Ah, but she was a wonderful actress," Periander would remind her. "The minute she donned those robes and mask, she became Apollo's virgin bride, waiting for her adoring bridegroom."

Then he would explain how it wasn't that the Oracle was a fraud. Just that Mighty Apollo couldn't sit there, day in and day out, with nothing else to do but assure this merchant that his investment was sound or that poet that his next work would be a masterpiece. When the gods spoke, mortals knew it, Periander reminded her solemnly, and when Apollo *did* speak through the mouth of the Oracle, then the poor creature was doomed. But by maintaining the pretence, such was Delphi's standing in the Greek world that men came from all over to receive the god's approbation, undergoing various rituals to win Him over. It was vital their trust in Him was upheld.

Backed by a massive administration ranging from the Governing Council to the countless scribes that toiled to keep the mountain of files up-to-date, the Oracle hosted Games to rival Olympia and held musical competitions that would turn Orpheus himself green with envy. And thus, for the thousands of pilgrims who flocked to the shrine hoping to have a curse lifted or find love, found a new colony overseas or sue for peace with their neighbours, the Oracle represented stability in a changing and unsettled world.

"You, child, are even better than your mother," Periander would tell her, and for her part, Cassandra was proud to contribute to the miracle that was Delphi. Rich or poor, every petitioner went home reassured that, if he sacrificed here or did penance there, Apollo would surely be with him. The emancipation of slaves was particularly rewarding for her. You couldn't ask for more than to give a man happiness.

And so, watching her father prostrate himself before the shrine of Zeus, the moonlight turning the lines in his face into chasms, her heart ached for the man whose wife had died after hearing Apollo's voice, and who had never got over the loss. And now, to add to the tragedy, his daughter's prophesies had been brutally sabotaged . . .

As he rose and poured a libation to the King of the Immortals, God of Vengeance and Justice and Honour, she realised with a start that her mother would have been the same age Cassandra was now. In her twenty-fifth summer.

Despite the throbbing heat of the night, the Oracle shivered. And wished Jason would hurry.

Zeus is the first, Zeus is the last, Zeus is the god with the divine

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thunderbolt.

The hymn kept going round in her mind.

Zeus is the head, Zeus is the middle, of Zeus all things have their end.

As she gazed down over the hillside, across the building works in various stages of construction, at the statues that lined the Sacred Way, Cassandra knew that she would remember this night for the rest of her life.

It was the night she walked into womanhood.

Behind her, the Shining Cliffs lived up to their name, glistening white in the moonlight. Riddled with caves and rich with fountains and springs, they were the playground of Pan, home to the Muses, and the stairway to the pinnacle from which those convicted of sacrilege against the gods were flung to their deaths. From the grove of holm oaks, an owl hooted softly.

Not a seer like her father, or a prophetess as was made out, Cassandra nevertheless saw the picture clear in her mind.

The king who rules the city-state from which I come is a weak man. Laertes' words floated back to her. *He puts the good of himself before the good of his people.*

The files had backed up this assessment, but weak and self-serving doesn't mean stupid. One by one, as Hercules tramped round the heavens, the pieces fell into place.

Laertes' king hadn't trusted his general an inch, and when Laertes set off on that long trek to Delphi, the king knew there could be only one question which needed an answer. Not about to give up his dynasty, he duly despatched his own man, an assassin, to ensure Laertes would not return.

Leaning her back against a pillar, Cassandra realised she'd never know for certain. Had the assassin travelled a different route, which took longer? Had he been caught in a storm out at sea? Taken ill? Who knows, but whatever happened, he must have arrived in Delphi well after Laertes had registered his petition and paid his admission fee. Prowling round on padded feet, enquiring in whispers, the assassin would have noted the power that one gold statuette held, shooting Laertes up the queue of merchants and military men, athletes and musicians, much less the scores of humble smallholders. And the assassin would have quickly realised that, if the Treasury could be bought, so could individuals. It was his nature to probe and investigate. To determine which priest drank from gold goblets at home. Which acolyte kept an expensive mistress. Whether the Guardian of the Keys had run up debts.

From the moment Laertes set foot outside his own country, he was a dead man. It had only been a question of timing. Cassandra understood. This was the way of the world. It was the next part she had trouble comprehending. The fact that the murder had not only happened in *her* world, but that the killer specifically

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intended to discredit the Oracle.

And she did not mean the assassin.

His job was over once he'd established who could be bribed, and for how much. Even the method of execution was out of his hands.

Poison . . .

Extracted from the deadly nightshade, whose juice induces dry mouth, impaired speech—all the things, in fact, that she had witnessed from inside her sanctum, before Laertes' eyesight failed and he'd found difficulty breathing, prior to lapsing into unconsciousness and finally death. The heat from the column diffused into her backbone. It all came back to that tiny phial of liquid that had been fed to him inside the temple, she reflected, and that was the sad part. *Inside* the temple. For in this killing, timing was crucial. And, standing beneath the stars and the moon that saw everything, Cassandra knew that the hand that had delivered that fatal dose of belladonna belonged to someone not only familiar with the temple, but who knew the sanctum inside out. Who understood not only the mind of the petitioner, but also the intricacies of the disorientation process—and was in a position to play on both. Manipulating the timing of the drug, so that Laertes wouldn't notice anything out of the ordinary, whilst ensuring that the Oracle's suspicions would not be aroused, either. Someone, in short, who knew she would set the supplicant a riddle. And be discredited when Laertes collapsed of natural causes . . .

It was not coincidence, she realised with a chill, that the temple physician was laid up with a broken leg. His fall from the Shining Cliffs was a nudge, not a stumble, and her stomach churned as she remembered who it was who'd raced down the cliffs to sound the alarm—

"So that's where you're hiding!"

His voice broke the silence now, and as she turned, Cassandra's limbs were shaking.

Ah, but she was a wonderful actress, her father said of her mother. *But you. You are even better.*

This was true. Her smile was wide as she greeted him brightly.

"Jason!" She injected relief into her voice. "I thought you'd gone back to bed! So now tell me. What symptoms did you find on Laertes' body?"

"That's what took me so long," he said, and when he moved towards her, she backed away. "No matter how hard I pleaded, no matter what tricks I pulled, the Guardians of the Vigil would not let me near him."

Cassandra wished she could have sounded surprised.

In the darkness of the inner sanctum, music that was a combination of Persian and Egyptian, Phoenician and Arabic filtered down from the temple. Behind the partition painted to resemble the

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rockface, the doves of prophesy cooed, and in the tripod, sweet-smelling herbs emitted their scents. Lemon balm, oregano, and mint.

She was a wonderful actress, but you, child, you are better.

In the past, whenever a sibyl had heard the true voice of Apollo, she had complained of smoke rising from a fissure in the floor that gave off a light, scented odour. The breath of the god. After which she fell into that fateful, delirious trance—

Wailing and thrashing in her created odour, Cassandra quickly attracted the attention of the priests and acolytes above. Jason burst through the false wall in alarm.

"What is it, my love? What's the matter?"

When she didn't respond, he called for "Water! Light! Give her air!" And when he tried to lift her off the stool, he found that he could not. A crowd gathered round, her father among them, his face a picture of agony.

I'm sorry, so sorry, she wanted to tell him. *I know this is how you found my mother so long ago, but truly I know no other way. . . .*

The Oracle could not—must not—be discredited.

Even at the expense of her own father's pain.

Soon the Council came running, the heavyweights who ran the administration, and the aristocrats who governed it. Through her twitching and groaning, Cassandra saw the face of her cousin, Hermione, at the edge of the crush. Familial concern tinged with more than just a little hopefulness, she noticed through her jibbering. Poor, sweet Hermione. Fated to be disappointed again.

"I see death which is not a death," she howled, and there was no need to disguise her voice. This was Apollo speaking through Cassandra's own voice, just as he had through previous sibyls'.

"Laertes," someone hissed in translation. "She means it was murder."

Her arms flailed. "From fruit which is not a fruit."

"Poison," whispered somebody else.

"I see the shadow of the Ferryman inside this chamber."

Beside her, Jason's frame had gone unaccountably still and, as her frenzy caused her to toss more herbs of prophesy into the eternal flame, she reflected again on how handsome he was. How funny. How virile. *How cunning.*

"Who?" one of the priests asked. "Who killed Laertes?"

But the Oracle was passing into convulsions, and as she thrashed, Cassandra noticed her father slip away from the sanctum, tears streaming down his bearded cheeks. She ached to go with him, hug him tight to her breast, show him that his daughter was not dying. But the Oracle could not leave. Rooted to her stool—to her destiny—Cassandra tore at her hair in grief and despair.

You are better than your mother . . .

She was not, she was not, this anguish was real. Here, before the Governing Council and the enterprise that was Delphi, she was

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betraying the only man she'd ever loved.

"Can you see in your flames the face of the murderer?" one of the elders asked. "Do you see the face of the man who sought to bring disgrace on this place?"

Not in the flames, she wanted to scream. *I see his face here, in my heart.*

"Zeus is the foundation of the earth and the sky." She was supposed to be rambling. She might as well ramble from the hymn that had kept her awake all through the night. And the images that had tormented her with it. "Zeus is the breath of all things."

"She means divine retribution will befall him," someone interpreted.

"I see two heads in a womb and two quivers of arrows. And the bear will ride on the back of the dolphin and smite the beast that tried to kill him."

"Twins!" an acolyte shouted. "She means twins," and suddenly all the priests were chorusing at once.

"The dolphin is Apollo—"

"—his arrows are rays of light!"

It must be the shock of the Oracle's trance, she decided. Otherwise they'd have realised instantly that the dolphin was Apollo's sacred emblem, just as the bear was his sister's.

"Apollo is telling us that sacrilege has been perpetrated against him, but that Artemis, the huntress, will strike down the assassin on behalf of her brother."

Mutterings ran round the sanctum.

"The killer has already left Delphi—"

"—but we need take no action ourselves—"

"— because Apollo will have his revenge through his sister!"

"Justice is served," someone pronounced.

But what was justice, if not a matter of perspective? From the corner of her eye, she glanced at Jason. His face might as well have been carved of stone. Tasked with ensuring Laertes' death, the assassin had been true to his mission, and in so doing he had saved a crown and a dynasty. To his king, crushing rebellion was righteous. The assassin would be a hero when he returned—but what justice for the man who fed Laertes the poison?

With a final shriek, Cassandra threw her arms into the air, then collapsed onto the floor. This was the sign that the Oracle had stopped prophesying. Visions were only possible when seated upon her sacred stool. The crowd gasped.

"It's a miracle!"

"The trance hasn't claimed her life after all."

Even Hermione appeared relieved.

"Apollo has spoken without killing his mouthpiece—"

"—he wants us to know that this sacrilege will be avenged."

As they trickled out—the Council, the priests, even Jason, who

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she noticed was shaking—four words echoed inside her head. *Sacrilege will be avenged.* Yes, it would, she thought dully. Sacrilege would be avenged, but not in the way they imagined.

Only she, Cassandra, had the power to do that. . . .

Alone in her sanctum, the Oracle wept.

"I'm so sorry, Cassandra." The priests bade the stretcher-bearers lay down their burden. "You have our deepest sympathy."

The body was covered by linen, but the red stains told their own story. She stared with a heart that was broken.

"It was the will of the gods, Cassandra. Apollo needed a sacrifice, and since he spared your life, he took the life of someone you loved."

Not Apollo, she thought heavily. He took his own life. . . .

"We found him lying at the foot of the pinnacle." The priests shuffled awkwardly. "There was . . . nothing anybody could do."

Knowing sympathy was inadequate, they retreated, leaving her alone with the body. How long, though—an hour?—before they trooped back? Not long, that's for sure, since it was essential that the obsequies commenced as quickly as possible, and since women were not allowed inside the temple mortuary, this was her only—and last—time alone with him. She wished she could make peace with him, too.

We named you Cassandra, your mother and I, because during the time of the Trojan War, Cassandra's curse was to prophesy but not be believed. Her father's words echoed in the stillness. *We thought, no we* hoped, *it would spare you the fate of the previous sibyls. But you, child*—he had smiled—*you were always so headstrong.*

"The name Jason means healing," a voice rasped at her shoulder. "Which I will, if you will allow me."

She looked up at him, blond and bronzed, and thought her heart would break in two. He knew. He knew the minute he'd tried to inspect Laertes' corpse that something wasn't right. . . .

"I prised it out of the Keepers of the Vigil in the end," he had told her. "No one was allowed near the body. Only someone in authority could have issued that command. I made them divulge who, then I knocked up the temple physician."

That's why he was gone so long, he explained.

"The physician said that Periander had been acting oddly for a few days, and that he'd been worried."

It was why the physician agreed to go for a walk above the Shining Cliffs with him, and why he'd accepted it had been Periander's clumsiness, not malice, that had caused him to fall and break his ankle.

Jason stared at the bloodied sheet on the bier stained by one tear, then another, then another. "Your father was not a bad man," he whispered.

"With so many choices open to him, so many different paths he could have taken," she sobbed, "why did he choose to become a

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cold-blooded killer?"

"Because, darling, he loved you."

Anger replaced grief. "It was not for him to decide Laertes' fate," Cassandra spat. "Between us we could have used the Oracle to divert Laertes from his murderous intentions, and at least warn him of the assassin at his back. After that, it would be up to him how he proceeded, not for my father to decide."

Jason watched her tears darken the shroud.

"Laertes came to Delphi to receive sanction for the rebellion he was planning. The king's assassin followed," he said. "By listening and observing, he found a willing implement in, yes, this temple's seer of all people, but don't be too harsh on your father, my love. We all have something we want desperately, and we all have something to trade. Your father simply wanted to save his daughter's life."

Old sequences replayed in her head. Periander grief-stricken when his beloved wife fell ill to the noxious vapours inside the sanctum. But not half so pained as the day his only child announced that she was following the same career path as her mother.

"To spare you the agony of dying young, your father became the assassin's instrument, feeding Laertes belladonna in the belief that, whatever happened, Laertes was a dead man, but this way he could at least save his daughter."

If only it were that simple, Cassandra thought. He reasoned that if he discredited the Oracle and another prophetess took her place, what did principle matter, provided his daughter was safe? But did he not realise that she not only understood but accepted, when she donned the bridal robes, that the deadly vapours that rose from the rock would probably kill her? Weighed against the balance of life, the opportunity to become the holy Oracle at Delphi was still the most exciting, the most challenging, the most invigorating role any woman could hope to take on.

"To live a few years fully is better than to live many years badly," she said, hugging her arms to her breast.

Once again, the decision was not her father's to make, but the tragedy was that with Jason's assistance she had arranged that circus this morning specifically to convince Periander that his daughter had breathed the vapours of death and that there was nothing for him to live for. Sacrilege in Apollo's shrine had indeed been punished. But at what price, she wondered—

"Come," Jason said. "The priests are returning. Let's go back to the sanctum." He kissed her tear-stained cheeks. "There's a fissure I want to block up."

Healing, he said. *The name Jason means healing,* and maybe, just maybe, Cassandra would grow to love him as much as he adored her.

Right now, though, she doubted it.

How could she love him, if she hated herself? ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

A VIENNESE ROMANCE

by Stefan Slupetzky

Translated from the German by Mary Tannert

Lizzy had almost everything. Everything but a place of her own. But because she had almost everything, she had Charlie, and he had a spare. A spare apartment, that is. Charlie would have moved in with Lizzy, but Lizzy said: "You know, living together's best when I'm doin' it alone. 'Cause of the vibes, you know? Then I can think about you more than when you're always here. Know what I mean? Yeah, you know . . ."

Charlie didn't know, not really, but Lizzy got the penthouse high above the park, with the rooftop terrace and everything. Charlie had more than just "everything"; that was from his days as a great center forward on the soccer field and because he had a star manager and all. But Charlie wasn't the brightest guy, and, well, he could be a little impulsive. Once, for example, when Lizzy didn't answer the phone or open the door for two whole days, Charlie got a little wound up. Luckily, Lizzy's Fiat was still in the underground parking garage, and to make sure it stayed there, Charlie slit all four tires.

Lizzy was pretty shaken up. "My Chitty Bang," she sobbed. "You broke my Chitty Bang!" All of a sudden, Charlie couldn't be mad at her anymore; he was overcome by guilt instead. And soon Chitty Bang's parking spot was occupied by a shiny new red Ferrari. To make up. Because basically Charlie was a good guy.

Stefan Slupetzky was born in 1962 in Vienna and studied at the Vienna Academy of Arts. He worked as both a musician and drawing teacher before turning to writing, and has written and illustrated more than a dozen books for children. Mr. Slupetzky now writes dramas, short fiction, and novels for adults. His crime-fiction debut, *The Case of the Lemming*, was awarded the Friedrich Glauser prize for best first crime novel. ¶

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So Lizzy forgave him. "Oh, Charliesweetie," she sighed, and blew gently in his ear. Charliesweetie liked that.

Even so, a week later the television took the brunt of it, on account of a letter on Lizzy's nightstand. A letter that she hid from Charlie fast—but not fast enough.

"I can't stand it, I just can't stand it!" screamed Lizzy, and locked herself in the bathroom.

Charlie was seized with a terrible fear that Lizzy would slit her wrists. But she didn't, and the next day, when Charlie apologized with a Super Reality Video Wall, he was happy, because Lizzy blew in his ear again.

And so, with time, Lizzy's penthouse was no longer a run-of-the-mill penthouse with a view of the park and a rooftop terrace and all. The couch had been replaced with a queen-sized electrical massage lounge; where the bathtub had been there was a Jacuzzi; the extra-bright daylight lamp had become a whole solarium. And Charlie never broke anything twice. Lizzy made sure of that. The business with the sixty-piece dinner service, for example. Lizzy had found it when she was out shopping and had fallen in love with it. And the next time Charlie got all wound up, she ran into the kitchen, threw herself protectively in front of the china cabinet, arms flung wide, and begged him: "No, not Mama's beautiful plates!" And before you knew it, Lizzy had her sixty-piece porcelain service. And a nice new mahogany cabinet to put it in.

It could have turned out to be a great long-term relationship, with consideration on both sides and genuine understanding and everything. But at some point Lizzy noticed that Charlie hadn't been wound up for two whole weeks, and all of a sudden it was Lizzy who was nervous. She thought: *I have this funny kind of feeling that my sweetie's neglecting me. Yeah, just like Lucy and Tommy. It's the beginning of the end, Lucy always says . . .*

And that's when Lizzy got the idea. The idea with Picasso's beard, that is. There was this report on the television news about an art auction in New York, and Lizzy couldn't change the channel right away to *Rich and Famous* because her fingernails weren't quite dry. And when she heard what they were asking for the pictures, that was the beginning of Lizzy's interest in art. Eyes wide, she scribbled the name "Picasso" on a scrap of paper. And afterward, she dug out the scrap of paper, learned the name by heart, and went out in search of a bookstore.

It didn't take Lizzy long at all to draw one of the funny-looking naked women from the *Great Book of Picasso.* On the third try, she was satisfied. And once she had it in the big golden frame from the furniture store, it looked pretty good to her. Lizzy hung it over the bed between the cat portrait and the sunset.

Then she called Lucy. "Hi, it's Lizzy . . . Hey, Lucy, you gotta do me a favor, okay? But it's gotta be a secret, so don't tell anyone,

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okay? See, Tommy shaves with an electric shaver, doesn't he? Well, see, the thing is, I could really use some of the hairs from the shaver. No, it's not a joke! What, you guys are splitting up? No, really? Hey, well, all I can say is: Men! You know? But hey, can you do it? The hairs from the shaver, I mean? . . . Hey, super, really! I'll come over tomorrow and pick them up. Tomorrow afternoon. Hey, take care of yourself, okay? Bye!"

Two days later, Charlie turned up to see Lizzy. It took awhile until he went into the bathroom, and in the bathroom it took awhile until he noticed the sink. But when he did, Charlie showed he was the same guy he'd always been.

"Who is it?" he bellowed. "Who? . . . Shaving! There!" And when he tore into the bedroom, Charlie had that crazy look that Lizzy had been waiting for.

"Anything, sweetie!" she cried out. "Anything but my Picasso!"

"Picasso? Where is that pig? Where's the damn pig?!" And then Charlie saw the picture on the wall, and that was the last straw. It bothered Lizzy a little when the beautiful picture frame got broken, but she didn't say anything; she was a strong woman.

And Charlie was a man of his word. He was pale when he got back from New York, but he had it, he really had it with him, the genuine Picasso. And it was a really big one, an oil painting, just the way he'd promised Lizzy. But when she said, "Oh, Charliesweetie" and blew in his ear, it was different from before, because Charlie was still pale, and didn't look happy at all.

Two weeks later, Charlie took the elevator to the top floor, went into the penthouse, and took care of Lizzy. Then he packed everything that was left of her into the deep freeze. And didn't get wound up at all, the whole time.

Lizzy's plan wasn't a bad idea, but even so, she'd made a mistake: She'd told Lucy about it. And it was Lucy who told Charlie the whole story when he got back from New York.

Because Lucy had almost everything. Everything but a place of her own. But because she had almost everything, she had Charlie, and he had a spare. ●

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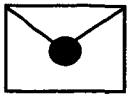

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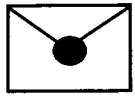

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VALENTINE, JULY HEAT WAVE

by Joyce Carol Oates

A National Book Award winner and a recipient of the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction, Joyce Carol Oates is the author of many important literary novels, and short-story and poetry collections. She has also become a notable contributor to crime fiction in recent years. Her second collection of crime stories, *The Museum of Dr. Moses: Tales of Mystery and Suspense*, is due from Harcourt in August. She's also got a new novel due in June. See *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (Ecco). †

My calculated estimate is *Eight days should be about right.*

Not that I am a pathologist, or any kind of "naturalist." My title at the university is professor of humanities. Yet a little research has made me fairly confident *Eight days during this heat should be about right.*

Because I have loved you, I will not cease to love you. It is not my way (as I believe you must know) to alter. As you vowed to be *my wife,* I vowed to be *your husband.* There can be no alteration of such vows. This, you know.

You will return to our house, you will return to our bedroom. When I beckon you inside you will step inside. When I beckon you to me you will come to me. You will judge if my estimate has been correct.

Eight days! My valentine.

The paradox is: Love is a live thing, and live things must die.

Sometimes abruptly, and sometimes over time.

Live things lose life: vitality, animation, the pulse of a beating heart and coursing blood carrying oxygen to the brain, the ability to withstand invasion by predatory organisms that devour them. Live things become, in the most elemental, crudest way

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of speaking, dead things.

And yet, the paradox remains: In the very body of death, in the very corpse of love, an astonishing new life breeds.

This valentine I have prepared for you, out of the very body of love.

You will arrive at the house alone, for that is your promise. Though you have ceased to love me (as you claim) you have not ceased to be an individual of integrity and so I know that you would not violate that promise. I believe you when you've claimed that there is no other man in your life: no other "love." And so, you will return to our house alone.

Your flight from Denver is due to arrive at 3:22 P.M. You've asked me not to meet you at the airport and so I have honored that wish. You've said that you prefer to rent a car at the airport and drive to the house by yourself and after you have emptied your closets, drawers, shelves of those items of yours you care to take away with you, you prefer to drive away alone, and to spend the night at an airport hotel where you've made a reservation. (Eight days ago when I called every airport hotel and motel to see if you'd made the reservation yet, you had not. At least, not under your married name.) When you arrive at the house, you will not turn into the driveway but park on the street. You will stare at the house. You will feel very tired. You will feel like a woman in a trance of—what?

Guilt, surely. Dread. That sick sense of imminent justice when we realize we must be punished, we will get what we "deserve."

Or maybe you will simply think: *Within the hour it will be ended. At last, I will be free!*

Sometime before 4 P.M. you will arrive at the house, assuming the flight from Denver isn't delayed. You had not known you were flying into a Midwestern heat wave and now you are reluctant to leave the air-conditioned interior of the car. For five weeks you've been away and now, staring at the house set back some distance from the street, amid tall, aging oaks and evergreens, you will wish to think *Nothing seems to have changed.* As if you have not noticed that, at the windows, downstairs and upstairs, venetian blinds seem to have been drawn tightly shut. As if you have not noticed that the grass in the front lawn is overgrown and gone to seed and in the glaring heat of the summer sun patches of lawn have begun to burn out.

On the flagstone walk leading to the front door, a scattering of newspapers, fliers. The mailbox is stuffed with mail no one seems to have taken in for several days though you will not have registered *Eight days!* at this time.

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Perhaps by this time you will concede that, yes, you are feeling uneasy. Guilty, and uneasy.

Knowing how particular your husband is about such things as the maintenance of the house and grounds: the maintenance of neatness, orderliness. The exterior of the house no less than the interior. Recognizing that appearances are trivial, and yet: Appearances can be signals that a fundamental principle of order has been violated.

At the margins of order is anarchy. What is anarchy but brute stupidity!

And so, seeing uneasily that the house seems to be showing signs of neglect, quickly you wish to tell yourself *But it can have nothing to do with me!* Five weeks you've been away and only twice, each time briefly, you have called me, and spoken with me. Pleading with me *Let me go, please let me go* as if I, of all people, required pleading-with.

My valentine! My love.

You will have seen: my car parked in the driveway, beside the house. And so you know (with a sinking heart? with a thrill of anticipation?) that I am home. (For I might have departed, as sometimes, admittedly, in our marriage I did depart, to work in my office at the university for long, utterly absorbed and delirious hours, with no awareness of time.) Not only is the car in the driveway, but I have promised you that I would be here, at this time; that we might make our final arrangements together, preparatory to divorce.

The car in the driveway is in fact "our" car. As the house is "our" house. For our property is jointly owned. Though you brought no financial resources to our marriage and it has been entirely my university income that has supported us yet our property is jointly owned, for this was my wish.

As you are *my wife,* so I am *your husband.* Symmetry, sanctity.

This valentine I've designed for you, in homage to the sanctity of marriage.

On the drive from the airport, you will have had time to think: to rehearse. You will repeat what you've told me and I will try to appeal to you to change your mind but of course you will not change your mind *Can't return, not for more than an hour* for that is the point of your returning: to go away again. You are adamant, you have made up your mind. *So sorry please forgive if you can* you are genuine in your regret and yet adamant.

The house, our house: 119 Worth Avenue. Five years ago when we were first married you'd thought that this house was "beautiful"—"special." Like the old residential neighborhood of similarly large houses on wooded lots, built on a hill overlooking the univer-

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sity arboretum. In this neighborhood known as University Heights most of the houses are solidly built brick with here and there a sprawling white colonial, dating back to the early decades of the twentieth century. Our house is dark-red brick and stucco, two stories and a third part-story between steep shingled roofs. Perhaps it is not a beautiful house but certainly it is an attractive, dignified house with black shutters, leaded-glass windows, a screened veranda, and lifting from the right-hand front corner of the second floor a quaint Victorian structure like a turret. You'd hurried to see this room when the real-estate agent showed us the house but were disappointed when it turned out to be little more than an architectural ornament, impractical even as a child's bedroom.

On the phone you'd murmured *Thank God no children.*

Since you've turned off the car's motor, the air conditioning has ceased and you will begin to feel a prickling of heat. As if a gigantic breath is being exhaled that is warm, stale, humid, and will envelop you.

So proud of your promotion, Daryll. So young!

How you embarrassed me in the presence of others. How in your sweetly oblivious way you insulted me. Of course you had no idea. Of course you meant well. As if the fact that I was the youngest "senior" professor in the humanities division of the university at the time of my promotion was a matter of significance to me.

As my special field is Philosophy of Mind so it's "mind" that is valued, not trivial attributes like age, personality. All of philosophy is an effort of the mental faculties to discriminate between the trivial and the profound, the fleeting and the permanent, the many and the One. Pride is not only to be rejected on an ethical basis but on an epistemological basis, for how to "take pride" in one's self?—in one's physical being, in which the brain is encased? (Brain being the mysterious yet clearly organic repository of "mind.") And how to "take pride" in what is surely no more than an accident of birth?

You spoke impulsively, you had no idea of the crudeness of your words. Though in naiveté there is a kind of subtle aggression. Your artless blunders made me wince in the presence of my older colleagues (for whom references to youth, as to age, were surely unwelcome) and in the presence of my family (who disapproved of my marrying you, not on the grounds that you were too young, but that you were but a departmental secretary, "no match" intellectually for me which provoked me to a rare, stinging reply *But who would be an intellectual match for me? Who, and also female?)*

Yet I never blamed you. I never accused you. Perhaps in my reticence. My silences. My long interludes of utter absorption in my work. Never did I speak of the flaws of your character and if I

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speak of them now it is belatedly and without condemnation. Almost, with a kind of nostalgia. A kind of melancholy affection. Though you came to believe that I was "judgmental"—"hypercritical"—truly you had no idea how I spared you. Many times.

Here is the first shock: the heat.

As you leave the car, headed up the flagstone path to the front door. This wall of heat, waves of heat shimmering and nearly visible rushing at you. "Oh! My God." Several weeks away in mile-high Denver have lulled you into forgetting what a midsummer heat wave in this sea-level Midwestern city can be.

Stale humid heat. Like a cloud of heavy, inert gas.

The heat of my wrath. The heat of my hurt. As you are my wife I spared you, rarely did I speak harshly to you even when you seemed to lose all control and screamed at me *Let me go! Let me go! I am sorry I never loved you please let me go!*

That hour, the first time I saw your face so stricken with repugnance for me. Always, I will remember that hour.

As if, for the five years of our cohabitation, you'd been in disguise, you'd been playing a role, and now, abruptly and without warning, as if you hadn't known what you would say as you began to scream at me, you'd cast aside the disguise, tore off the mask and confronted me. *Don't love you. It was a mistake. Can't stay here. Can't breathe. Let me go!*

I was stunned. I had never imagined such words. I saw your mouth moving, I heard not words but sounds, strangulated sounds, you backed away from me, your face was contorted with dislike.

I told you then: I could not let you go. Would not let you go. For how could I, you are *my wife.*

Remembering how on a snowy morning some months before, in late winter, you'd entered my study in my absence and propped up a valentine on the window sill facing my desk. For often you did such things, playful, childlike, not seeming to mind if I scarcely noticed, or, noticing, paid much attention. The valentine came in a bright red envelope, absorbed in my work somehow I hadn't noticed. Days passed and I did not notice (evidently) and at last you came into my study to open the envelope for me laughing in your light rippling way (that did not sound accusing, only perhaps just slightly wounded) and you drew out of the red envelope a card of a kind that might be given to a child, a kitten peeking out of a watering can and inside a bright red TO MY VALENTINE. And your name. And I stared at this card not seeming to grasp for a moment what it was, a "valentine," thrust into my face for me to admire.

Perhaps I was abrupt with you then. Or perhaps I simply turned away. Whereof one cannot speak, there one must be silent. The

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maddened buzzing of flies is a kind of silence, I think. Like all of nature: the blind devouring force to which Schopenhauer gave the name *will.*

Your promise was, at the time of our marriage, you would not be hurt. You would not be jealous of my work, though knowing that my work, as it is the best part of me, must always take priority over my personal life. Freely you'd given this promise, if perhaps recklessly. You would not be jealous of my life apart from you, and you would not be hurt. Bravely pledging *I can love enough for both of us!*

And yet, you never grasped the most elemental logistics of my work. The most elemental principles of philosophy: the quest for truth. Of course, I hardly expected you, lacking even a bachelor's degree from a mediocre land-grant university, to understand my work which is understood by very few in my profession, but I did expect you, as my wife, to understand that there can be no work more exacting, exhausting, and heroic.

But now we are beyond even broken promises. Inside our house, your valentine is waiting.

As a younger man only just embarked upon the quest of truth, I'd imagined that the great work of my life would be a definitive refutation of Descartes, who so bluntly separated "mind" and "body" at the very start of modern philosophy, but unexpectedly in my early thirties my most original work has become a corroboration and a clarification of the Cartesian position: that "mind" inhabits "body" but is not subsumed in "body." For the principles of logic, as I have demonstrated by logical argument, in a systematic geometry in the mode of Spinoza, transcend all merely "bodily" limitations. All this, transmuted into the most precise symbols.

When love dies, can it be revived? We will see.

On the front stoop you will ring the doorbell. Like any visitor.

Not wishing to enter the house by the side door, as you'd done when you lived here.

Calling in a low voice my name: "Daryll?"

How strange, *Daryll* is my name. My given name. Yet I am hardly identical with *Daryll* and in the language of logic it might even be claimed that I am *no thing* that is *Daryll* though I am simultaneously *no thing* that is *not-Daryll*. Rather, *Daryll* is irrelevant to what I am, or what I have become.

No answer. You will try the door knocker. And no answer.

How quiet! Almost, you might think that no one is home.

You will take out your house key, carried inside your wallet, in your purse. Fitting the key into the lock you will experience a moment's vertigo, wishing to think that the key no longer fits the lock; that your furious husband has changed the locks on the

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doors, and expelled you from his life, as you wish to be expelled from his life. But no, the lock does fit. Of course.

Pushing open the door. A heavy oak door, painted black.

Unconsciously you will have expected the interior of the stolid old dark-brick house to be coolly air-conditioned and so the shock of over-warm, stale air, a rancid-smelling air seems to strike you full in the face. "Hello? Daryll? Are you . . . "

How weak and faltering, your voice in your own ears. And how your nostrils are pinching at this strange, unexpected smell.

Rancid-ripe. Sweet as rotted fruit, yet more virulent. Rotted flesh?

Please forgive!

Can't return. Not for more than an hour.

It was my fault, I had no idea . . .

. . . from the start, I think I knew. What a mistake we'd both made.

Yes I admit: I was flattered.

. . . young, and ignorant. And vain.

That you, the most brilliant of the younger professors in the department . . .

Tried to love you. To be a wife to you. But . . .

Just to pack my things. And what I can't take with me, you can give to Goodwill. Or throw out with the trash.

. . . the way they spoke of you, in the department. Your integrity, your genius. And stubborn, and strong . . .

If I'd known more! More about men. Like you I was shy, I'd been afraid of men, I think. A virgin at twenty-five . . .

No. I don't think so.

Even at the beginning, no. Looking back at it now, I don't think I ever did, Daryll. It was a kind of . . .

. . . like a masquerade, a pretense. When you said you thought you loved me. Wanting so badly to believe . . .

Please, Daryll? Can you? Forgive?

. . . only just time enough to pack a few things. The divorce can be finalized by our lawyers, we won't need to meet again.

The most brilliant young philosopher of his generation, they said of you. And he is ours . . .

This masquerade. "Marriage."

So badly I wanted to be your wife. I am so ashamed!

Daryll? Can you forgive me?

Standing in the doorway of the living room you will see to your astonishment that sheets—bedsheets?—have been carefully drawn over the furniture, like shrouds. One of the smaller Oriental rugs has been rolled up and secured with twine as if in preparation for being hauled away. Books have been removed from the

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shelves that cover most of two walls of the living room and these books have been neatly placed in cardboard boxes. At the windows, blinds have been tightly drawn shut. Flies buzz and bat against the slats. There's a green twilit cast to the air as if the house has sunk beneath the surface of the sea.

The smell: What is it? You think *Something that has spoiled, in the kitchen?*

You will not venture into the kitchen at the rear of the house.

Though you enter the dining room, hesitantly. Seeing on the long oaken table a row of manila folders each neatly marked in black ink: FINANCES, BANK RECORDS, IRS & RECEIPTS, LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT.

You will begin now to be frightened. Panic like flames begins to lick at you.

And that sound: murmurous and buzzing as of muffled voices behind a shut door.

"Daryll? Are you—upstairs?"

Telling yourself *Run! Escape!*

Not too late. Turn back. Hurry!

Yet somehow you will make your way to the stairs. The broad front staircase with the dark-cranberry carpeting, worn in the center from years of footsteps predating your own. Like a sleepwalker you grip the banister, to steady your climb.

Is it guilt drawing you upstairs? A sick, excited sense of what you will discover? What it is your duty, as *my wife,* to discover?

You will be smiling, a small fixed smile. Your eyes opened wide yet glassy as if unseeing. And your heart rapidly beating as the wings of a trapped bird.

If you faint . . . Must not faint! Blood is draining from your brain, almost you can feel darkness encroaching at the edges of your vision; and your vision is narrowing, like a tunnel.

At the top of the stairs you pause, to clear your head. Except you can't seem to clear your head. Here, the smell is very strong. A smell confused with heat, shimmering waves of heat. You begin to gag, you feel nausea. Yet you can't turn back, you must make your way to the bedroom at the end of the corridor.

Past the charming little turret-room with the bay window and cushioned window seat. The room you'd imagined might somehow have been yours, or a child's room, but which proved to be impracticably small.

The door to the bedroom is shut. You press the flat of your hand against it feeling its heat. Even now thinking almost calmly *No. I will not. I am strong enough to resist.*

You dare to grasp the doorknob. Dare to open the door. Slowly.

How loud the buzzing is! A crackling sound like flame. And the rancid-rot smell, overwhelming as sound that is deafening, passing beyond your capacity to comprehend.

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Something brushes against your face. Lips, eyes. You wave it away, panicked. "Daryll? Are you—here?"

For there is motion in the room. A plane of something shifting, fluid, alive and iridescent-glittering: yet not human.

In the master bedroom, too, venetian blinds have been drawn at every window. There's the greeny undersea light. It takes you several seconds to realize that the room is covered in flies. The buzzing noise you've been hearing is flies. Thousands, millions?—flies covering the ceiling, the walls. And the carpet, which appears to be badly stained with something dark. And on the bed, a handsome four-poster bed that came with the house, a Victorian antique, there is a seething blanket of flies over a humanoid figure that seems to have partly melted into the bedclothes. Is this—who is this? The face, or what had been the face, is no longer recognizable. The skin has swollen to bursting like a burnt sausage and its hue is blackened and no longer does it have the texture of skin but of something pulpy, liquefied. Like the manic glittering flies that crawl over everything, this skin exudes a dark iridescence. The body has become a bloated balloon-body, fought over by masses of flies. Here and there, in crevices that had once been the mouth, the nostrils, the ears, there are writhing white patches, maggots like churning frenzied kernels of white rice. The throat of the humanoid figure seems to have been slashed. The bloodied steak knife lies close beside the figure, where it has been dropped. The figure's arms, covered in flies, are outstretched on the bed as if quivering, about to lift in an embrace of welcome. Everywhere, dark, coagulated blood has soaked the figure's clothing, the bedclothes, the bed, the carpet. The rot-smell is overwhelming. The carrion-smell. Yet you can't seem to turn away. Whatever has drawn you here has not yet released you. The entire room is a crimson wound, a place of the most exquisite mystery, seething with its own inner, secret life. *Your husband* has not died, has not vanished but has been transmogrified into another dimension of being, observing you through a galaxy of tiny unblinking eyes: the buzzing is his voice, multiplied by millions. Flies brush against your face. Flies brush against your lips, your eyelashes. You wave them away, you step forward, to approach the figure on the bed. *My valentine! My love.* ●

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Art by Jason Eckhardt

HERO TIME

by Andrew Klavan

Every man, were he to tell his secret thoughts, would confess that he occasionally daydreams about rescuing a woman from danger. One autumn night, Danny Easton got his chance.

It was a Friday night, cool, clear, pleasant. He'd been out with his two best friends from the agency. They had burgers and beer and more beer and parted company around eleven. Danny decided to walk home—get some air, clear his head. He took the avenue along the western edge of the park.

He'd tramped along a few blocks beside the park wall when a girl of about seventeen crossed the avenue at the intersection ahead of him. She was pretty in a coarse kind of way and she had a nice figure. Danny slowed down a little so he could stay behind her, so he could enjoy the sway of her overcoat and the flash of her legs. That was why he was watching when she reached a gap in the wall and turned into the park.

It took Danny by surprise. The park was well lighted, but it could be dangerous at night. He wouldn't have walked across it himself at that hour. As he watched the girl receding into the trees, he began to have a fantasy in which she was attacked by a

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rapist and he ran heroically to her aid.

Just then—as if his imagination had overflowed into reality—she actually *was* attacked. Two men scuttled out from behind some rocks. One of them grabbed the girl around the throat and dragged her off into the shadows under a cluster of plane trees. The other hunched after them into the dark.

It happened in a finger-snap and Danny's world was suddenly all rush and heartbeat. He was over the wall. He was running tear-ass across the grass. His mind had shifted gears and was racing faster than events so that things seemed to be unfolding in slow motion. He seemed to have time to meditate on every detail.

Andrew Klavan is the recipient of two Edgar Allan Poe Awards for his crime novels, and two of his books have been made into feature films, including *True Crime*, directed by Clint Eastwood, and *Don't Say a Word*, which starred Michael Douglas. Stephen King has called Andrew Klavan "the most original American novelist of crime and suspense since Cornell Woolrich." Mr. Klavan's new book, *Damnation Street*, was released by Harcourt in 2006.

He was screaming, "Hey! Hey! Let her go! Hey!" This was different from his fantasies. In his fantasies, he always fought the bad guys. In real life, he was hoping like crazy that his shouts would scare the bastards away. That would've been more than enough heroism to brag about at the office Monday morning.

As it turned out, when he reached the trees, the attackers seemed not to have heard his approach at all. They were both completely immersed in their business. One of them was holding a knife to the terrified girl's throat while the other straddled her thrashing body, ripping open her overcoat, pushing her skirt up. They both glanced around, startled, as Danny burst onto the scene.

Still running, Danny let fly with a wild, sloppy roundhouse. It cracked the nearest attacker on the cheek and sent him stumbling to his hands and knees. The other one, the guy with the knife, opened his mouth as if he'd seen Jesus come. The girl slipped from his slackened grip and plopped awkwardly to the earth.

Danny wheeled and threw another big punch. He hit the knife-man in the side of the neck. The knife-man fell back and gagged but he held onto his knife and waved it in front of him, fending Danny off. The other attacker, meanwhile, was scrambling angrily to his feet, ready to launch himself at the man who'd hit him. Danny was a strong, healthy twenty-seven-year-old, but he was only average size and he'd never been in any kind of a physical fight before, not even in school. He suddenly realized that these

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guys not only *could* kill him, they *would* kill him, gladly. The first gibberings of the Little Clown of Fear began to make themselves heard in a corner of his mind.

Just at that moment, though, the girl started screaming. It was an unbelievably loud and piercing sound which Danny had only heard before in horror movies and from his little sister. At the first sustained note, both attackers froze in their positions as if caught in a game of Red Light/Green Light. The next thing Danny knew, they were rocketing at top speed into the darkness and the far trees.

A breath flooded out of him and relief flooded through him. In his fantasies, the damsel in distress usually didn't do much, just waited around for him to rescue her. The bad guys usually ended up sprawled on the earth unconscious or bound hand and foot. But Danny was no idiot: Reality's reality. He knew a lucky outcome when he saw one. He grabbed the girl by the arm, drew her to her feet, and hustled her out of the park as fast as he could in case the attackers should decide to come back and slaughter them both.

Her name was Mary. She was a pretty tough kid. She had scratches on her face and neck and chest. The buttons had been ripped off her overcoat. Her top was torn, half of her bra was exposed. She was trembling, all right—hell, so was he—but she wasn't hysterical or anything. She was barely crying.

When they were back on the avenue, under a streetlight, she took stock of herself. She turned away from Danny to readjust her pantyhose discreetly. Belted the overcoat shut to cover the rest of the damage. Then she faced him again. She took a few angry swipes at her swimming eyes, smearing mascara around her cheeks and temples.

"Bastards," she said, with a bitter laugh. "You were really brave. Thank you."

"I guess we oughta call the cops," said Danny.

"Nah. Just help me get home, okay? I'm a little shaky."

They rode across town in a cab. Mary stared out the window. She made angry sniffling noises, dabbing at her eyes with a Kleenex. She didn't seem to want to talk.

So Danny sat silently. He went over what had happened in his mind, composing the story he would tell his friends, smoothing the rough edges. As his excitement subsided, he began to feel the effects of the business. His knuckles burned and his throat was hoarse from screaming and a sort of retrospective terror had come over him. All in all, though, he felt pretty good—even the pain felt satisfying. He had lived up to his imagination. He was a hero.

"Here it is," Mary said.

Danny looked out the window. His lips parted in silent surprise.

They were in one of the best sections of town, right next to the

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museum. They had stopped in front of an elegant stone townhouse.

Mary turned to him and flashed a weepy smile. "Would you mind coming in with me? My folks are gonna be crazed. They won't believe what happened. It would really help if you were there to back me up."

When they came through the door, Danny gaped at what he saw. The front hall was vast. A massive chandelier hung high, high above a marble floor. A fantastically wide staircase swept up to the second story with archaic grace. He could hardly believe the size of it all, the opulence. City real estate being what it was, it must've cost millions.

Almost at once, a man and woman in their fifties came hurrying down the stairs toward them: Mary's parents. They were both wearing bathrobes, hers a floral silk, his cotton, plaid. Danny realized they had seen him and Mary via the security camera above the front door and they were already upset. As she reached the marble floor, the woman opened her arms. Mary rushed into them.

"Oh, Mama!" she said. She started sobbing into her mother's shoulder.

Mary's father paused. He seemed to study the two women a moment. Then he glanced over at Danny. He was short—a head shorter than Danny was—but thickly, solidly built. He had silver hair; a rough, stony face. His eyes were black and hard. They glinted in the light.

"Was this you did this?" he asked quietly.

In all his young life, Danny had never felt anything like what he felt then. A watery weakness through his whole body, the taste of copper on his tongue, a spasm of pain in his back, a wild, childlike anxiety that he was about to lose control of his bladder: fear—he had never felt that kind of fear. He couldn't really tell why he felt it now. Something in the older man's posture, relaxed, unbristled, calm. Something in the thin line of his mouth, in his flinty eyes.

But Mary, still clinging to her mother's robe with one hand, swung her tear-stained face around to them. "No, Daddy, no! He fought them. There were two of them. They were gonna rape me. One had a knife. Danny was just passing by. He was so brave."

Her father continued to stare at Danny another second. Then he nodded, satisfied. A smile twitched at his lips. He gave Danny an approving slap on the shoulder.

Danny sagged. He breathed as if he hadn't breathed for long minutes. Maybe he hadn't.

"What was it— n——s?" said the older man.

The hateful word came out that casually, as if he used it all the time. Taken off-guard, Danny hesitated. Once, only last year, he'd told a cabdriver to shut the hell up when he started talking racist

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garbage like that. But he wasn't going to tell Mary's father to shut the hell up. He wasn't going to protest at all. On top of which, he couldn't exactly lie about the race of the attackers.

"Well . . . they were black guys, yeah," he said finally. Instantly, he felt his evening of courage stained, diminished. He'd been a hero before, but he felt like a coward now. He wished the night had faded away at its high point like a movie scene. Why couldn't it be like that? Why the hell couldn't life ever play out like daydreams?

Mary's father nodded. "Okay," he said. "Danny, huh? You did a good thing, Danny. I'm grateful. Tunny'll drive you home."

Danny's gaze followed the older man's gesture. He saw the shadow of another man in a corner of the foyer. The man must've come out of the door under the stairs. He was very large: tall, broad shoulders. Standing with his hands folded in front of him—just standing there, waiting. Tunny. What the hell kind of a name was Tunny?

Danny didn't want to get in a car with the guy. He didn't want Mary's father to know where he lived. He didn't want to be with these people at all anymore. He just wanted to get out of here.

He licked his lips. "Great," he said. "Great. Thanks."

Tunny met him in front of the townhouse, driving a black monster of a Lexus, the same kind of luxury sedan his boss at the agency drove. Danny moved to get in the front seat, but only the door to the back was open. Tunny sat behind the wheel, waiting, until Danny got in the back.

All through the silent drive downtown, Danny's mind was working, his imagination working. He hadn't had a good look at Tunny's face yet. He tried to catch glimpses of it in the rearview, but he couldn't see much in the dark of the car. He had a sense of the man's features as thick, brutal, and sardonic, but he might have been making that up. He was making up all kinds of things, all kinds of scenarios. Maybe Mary's father was a mob boss or an international criminal or something. Maybe he didn't want anyone alive to know his daughter had been "dishonored" in the park. Maybe Tunny was driving him out to some swamp across the state line where he'd make him kneel in the mud and put a bullet in the back of his head. Danny resolved he wouldn't kneel, but he remembered that watery feeling in his muscles when Mary's father had simply looked at him and, for the first time, he began to understand that you might not always have a choice about such things.

Danny kept his eye on the streets outside, watching to see if they turned off the wrong way—toward some swamp across the state line. They didn't. Tunny guided the Lexus straight down the avenue, then over to Danny's apartment building. The Lexus pulled up alongside the row of parked Toyotas and Hondas.

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"Thanks for the lift," said Danny.

"No problem," Tunny answered in a deep, dull voice. "You made a good friend tonight. I'll be seeing you."

When he was standing on the curb, Danny tried again to get a look at the driver's face. He thought he saw acne-scarred skin, a smirk. He wasn't sure. Then the Lexus was gone.

At work on Monday, Danny told the story of his daring rescue and showed off his bruised knuckles to his friends. He played down the part about Mary's father. He made a joke of it. "I wanted to say, 'Hey, you're welcome, you racist scumbag.'" His friends laughed. Gina praised him for his courage. Ellis obviously envied him and tried to tell some old hero stories about himself. It felt good—especially Gina's praise. Gina was small and slender with short black hair and cute, impish features. She was smart and ready to work hard with the guys, but she wasn't afraid to be frivolous and vulnerable and girly either. Danny liked that. Ellis liked it too. It was pretty well understood among them that she was going to choose one or the other of them after a while.

The three were the agency's hot team right now. Their work on the Wingdale account had made them up-and-coming stars. They were currently putting together a proposal for Paulson's, the national grocery chain, which was in play after leaving Michaelson & Fine. Bringing them into the agency would be a huge coup. That's what they'd been working on that Friday night when Danny had walked home by the park.

They were at it again all that week, brainstorming, putting the finishing touches on their pitch. By Thursday, they had it pretty well nailed down. They were in the tenth-floor conference room rehearsing and tweaking the last details when the door opened and Wally Harris poked his head in.

"Brad Spinker landed Paulson's," he told them—just like that.

The three charged into Spinker's office, Danny in the lead.

"I feel like crap about this, guys, really, I swear," said Spinker. He was tilted back in his chair. He had his feet up on his desk. He didn't look as if he felt like crap. He looked as if he felt great. "It was a casual thing. Y'know, a party. Paulson started unloading on me. So I was telling him you guys were working on something terrific—I was. But, you know, I threw in a couple of casual suggestions of my own along the way and . . ." Spinker was wearing a silk burgundy tie and had a burgundy handkerchief in the pocket of his pinstripe suit. His father ran a huge consulting firm. He'd probably gotten him the intro to Paulson.

Danny went into a rage. He didn't hold back. He started cursing at the son of a bitch right there in his office, pointing his finger at him, calling him names. It started to sound as if he'd actually punch him—which he probably wouldn't have. But the fury felt

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like bubbling acid in him and there was no question he would've loved to knock Spinker and his burgundy tie right over the back of his chair.

Finally, Ellis got in front of him, between him and Spinker's desk.

"It's over," Ellis kept saying to Danny, holding up his hands as if to push him back. "C'mon. Let's get out of here. It's over."

What could Danny do finally? He let Ellis maneuver him out of the office, still cursing over his shoulder, still calling the smirking Spinker names. Then they were out in the hall and he had nothing but his anger and his disappointment. It was the same for all three of them. They had nothing else left. They went to sit in the coffee shop on the corner where they'd done some of their best work on the proposal. They stared into their coffee concoctions and shook their heads and cursed the unfairness of it. They blamed Avram, their boss, for encouraging the agency's "cutthroat culture," and they fantasized about what they'd like to see happen to Spinker. All the while, they felt like losers because that's what losers did: blame and complain and fantasize and curse the unfairness of things.

But the Japanese have an expression—at least, Danny thought it was the Japanese. They said: Sit by the river long enough, and the body of your enemy will float by. If it was the Japanese, they sure knew a thing or two. Because, one week after Paulson signed on with the agency, Spinker underwent some kind of nuclear head explosion or something. One day, he just didn't show up for work. Next day, same thing. Then after he was AWOL almost a whole week, he called in—and he was in St. Louis. St. Louis, as in Missouri. When he got put through to Avram, he started babbling about too much pressure and a change of priorities and "a major reevaluation" and this, that, and the other. The bottom line was: He was gone, he'd quit, he was history. Suddenly, the agency had the Paulson's account and no one to handle it—except they did have someone because Danny, Ellis, and Gina had done nothing but work on Paulson's before Spinker pulled his double cross. So not only did Avram give them the account, within two weeks they were able to sell Paulson on all the stuff they'd been planning to sell him on in the first place. And because they'd rescued the agency in a crisis, they were even bigger stars than they would've been had they simply won the client over from the start.

From cursing in the coffee shop, they went to clinking beer mugs in their favorite bar.

"The gutter to the stars nonstop," as Ellis put it.

And Danny thought: Life was funny. You could never give up. There was always a chance that something good would happen.

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Of course, now they were working practically around the clock, getting the campaign ready to go. It was tiring, but it was fun. Also, Danny and Gina wrote most of the copy, so there were a couple of times when they worked late together, without Ellis. That gave Danny the chance he'd been waiting for.

He was careful about it. He didn't try anything at the office. Women could be sensitive about these things, Danny told himself sagely. Instead, he waited until they were at his apartment one night, doing a mind-meld over pizza. Gina was at the desk, at his laptop, Danny was leaning in toward the screen over her shoulder. She smelled like roses. The scent seemed to draw him in. After a while, his face was so close to hers, it was nothing to lean just that much closer and let his lips brush not even her cheek but only the soft, soft down on her cheek.

Gina jumped—jumped as if a spark had leapt between them. She twisted in the chair, rolled the chair an inch or two away from him. She gazed up at him with her big, tender brown eyes.

"Oh God. Oh God, Danny," she said sorrowfully.

Danny felt a terrible heaviness in his chest. "What? No good?" he said. "I thought . . . "

"No, no, no, it's not your fault. I should've said something. I kept meaning to, it's just . . . me and Ellis, we . . . "

"Oh. Oh jeez . . . " Danny straightened away from her chair. Threw his hands up like a basketball player pretending he hadn't committed a foul: "I'm really sorry, Gina."

"No, Danny. I'm sorry."

"I didn't know."

"I should've said something. I was going to. I just . . . "

"Sure. Sure. No, that's okay. It's, you know, you and Ellis—it's great. Bad for me, but great for you guys. Really."

He meant it. He didn't blame Gina. He didn't blame Ellis. He liked them both. He was just sad, that's all. He was surprised how sad he was. And disappointed. And jealous, too—he had to admit that. It wasn't only that Danny had imagined sleeping with Gina. He imagined sleeping with every cute girl he met. But he had also imagined waking up with her, holding her after the radio alarm started playing, sitting with her on a Sunday morning and talking over coffee while they read the paper. It hurt like hell to think that Ellis would be doing all that instead.

Again, though, the message life sent him was: Never despair. Hang tough. The opera ain't over till the fat lady sings.

For a week or so, he was very depressed about Gina. More depressed than he would've expected. At first, he thought it was the ego-blow of losing her to his friendly rival Ellis, which was worse somehow than having some stranger come along and snap her up. Soon, though, he realized it was more than that. It was

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Gina herself. He told himself that other girls got teary-eyed over baby pictures and made mischievous jokes and were generous with their help and got silly about clothes and movie stars. Plenty of girls were like that. But somehow, none of them added up to the whole Gina package. One morning—one morning when it was very bad—he looked at his half-shaven face in the mirror and whispered the truth to his own image: "You dumb dick. You're in love with her." Great time to figure it out.

Then, that very morning, at just about his darkest hour, he went into his office and there was an e-mail waiting for him from his boss. Avram wanted to meet with him before lunch. The way he was feeling—as down in the dumps as he was—his first thought was that he was going to be fired. But that didn't make sense. And, in fact, when he entered Avram's office, the roostery little man came out from behind that ten-square-acre desk of his and greeted him with a smile and an outstretched hand.

It got better from there. When Danny was seated on the sofa and Avram was enthroned in his armchair, one arm slung over the back, his legs crossed at the knee, the boss actually apologized for what he called "the Spinker cock-up." Danny could afford to play it generous now. It was past history, he said, with a little bygones-be-bygones shrug.

Avram went on in his strange style, at once fatherly and watchful. Danny always thought of him as a cross between a Dutch uncle and an assassin. When you were his friend you were his best friend and when you weren't his friend, you were dead meat.

"You've been doing such a great job on Paulson's, I want you to oversee the other division campaigns as well. Think you can handle that?"

Danny heard himself spluttering, "I . . . you mean, like, division manager? Isn't that Kane?"

"It was Kane. Now you'll be Kane. What do you think? Bigger office, bigger paycheck, bigger headaches, the whole deal."

It was such a shock that Danny was at the door, pumping Avram's hand, before he managed to wipe the stupid look off his face and say thank you.

"It's good for you here, right, Danny?" Avram said. "I mean, no complaints, right? Things are going great for you, aren't they?"

Great hardly covered it. Danny was going down in the elevator before he even began to comprehend the scope of his bounty. He was twenty-seven. Replacing Kane, who was old—forty, at least. At practically double the pay. With bonuses. Which practically made him rich.

He thought about what it would be like to tell Gina. That made him realize: He was going to be her boss now. He was going to be Ellis's boss too. He couldn't hide from himself that there was a certain amount of satisfaction in that. Not that it could make up for

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losing Gina. A stubborn misery haunting the pit of his stomach even now made him suspect that nothing would ever make up for that. But as consolation prizes go, this was a pretty good one.

Danny came out into the lobby. The revolving doors carried him onto the street. He had been so depressed when he entered the building that morning, but now he was in a sort of golden haze of happy confusion, gladness spreading in him like rays of rising sun, changing the aspect of everything it touched. He gazed around at the traffic and the skyscrapers and the autumn light—at the city which had suddenly become the backdrop of his success. He was so absorbed in it all, it was a moment before he realized what he'd seen: the black Lexus gliding past in the noonday rush, the pitted skin, the sardonic smirk on the face of the large man behind the wheel.

Was that Tunny?

Too late to tell—the car had already disappeared around the corner. It probably wasn't Tunny. Or maybe it was, but so what? Why should that bother him? He hadn't thought about the driver in weeks.

Still, the idea sank into him. It was weird. It felt like a drop of ink falling into all that golden happiness, a black drop spreading, darkening everything.

He was still thinking about it a few nights later. It kept nagging at him. He was in his apartment, scanning his laptop, trying to familiarize himself with the other projects that would soon be his responsibility. He only had half a mind for the work, was still excited, savoring his promotion, thinking about the future. Then, every now and again, he'd find he was thinking about Tunny, too. About the black Lexus driving by and that night he'd rescued Mary in the park and taken her home to her parents. And something else, something Avram said, the way he said it, something in the tone of his voice.

It's good for you here, right, Danny? I mean, no complaints, right? Things are going great for you.

Danny hadn't noticed it at the time, but when he thought back on it, it didn't sound like Avram. Avram, the self-made man, who fought his way up from the mean streets, who always knew what he wanted, who wasn't cowed by anyone or anything. He'd sounded uncertain. As if he needed Danny to reassure him. As if . . .

"As if he were afraid," Danny murmured.

It was ridiculous. Avram wasn't afraid of anything. Lawyers, journalists, the IRS. He'd told them all to go to hell at some point or other. What would he have to be afraid of?

Danny licked his lips. He thought about the black Lexus driving by and Tunny's smirk and the glinting, hard eyes of Mary's father. He thought about the photographs on Avram's desk, photographs

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of his five-year-old daughter and his eight-year-old son and his pretty wife who was pregnant again with a new baby. Everyone had something to be afraid of . . .

Danny shut himself up with a puff of laughter. His brain was a freaking nonsense factory once it got going. Remember that time he thought Tunny was going to drive him to a swamp somewhere and shoot him? Then there was that day he opened the *Post* and saw the headline *Police Seek Two Missing Teens*, and, for a second, when he looked at their pictures, he thought, *Hey, those are the guys from the park.* But, of course, they weren't. He could barely remember the attackers' faces anymore, but he was almost sure they weren't the same guys.

He shook his head and laughed at himself again.

Then there was Spinker taking off for St. Louis like that . . .

The door buzzer sounded. Danny checked his watch. After ten. Puzzled, he went to the intercom. Ellis.

Ellis was a big, broad-shouldered, blond, good-looking guy. Track and field at Stanford. Girls galore. Not the Great Brain of the Age or anything, but a sure feel for the markets and an expert way of befriending clients and intimidating them at the same time.

When he stepped into Danny's apartment, though, he looked unsteady—not his usual shambling, cheerful self—gray, uncertain. Danny gave him a bottle of beer and he knocked back half of it in one swig. He plunked himself on the sofa and looked at everything in the room except Danny. Danny watched him from his desk chair.

"Look," Ellis said. "I think I screwed up. Gina and me—that never made sense. She should be with you, man. We both know it."

"What are you talking about?" said Danny—all at once, he was a chaos of emotions. Confusion, dark thoughts, his heart soaring with unexpected hope. "You always wanted Gina. We talked about it a million times."

"Yeah, but you know me: I want everything in skirts that's not a Scotsman. And that's the other thing. Let's face it: Gina's a mommy waiting to happen. I'm not ready to go there. That's always been more your thing than mine."

Danny had to admit that was true. Ellis was the lover-boy, he was more the family-man type. "So—what?—you're dumping her?"

"Already did," said Ellis—and he drained half of the half of his beer that was left. "I told her right out, too. 'Danny's the one who's right for you.' I said it to her just like that, those words."

"Hey, if Gina wanted me, she'd . . ." But Danny glanced at his friend halfway through the sentence and the sentence died on his lips. What was that look on Ellis's face? That sickly look, his eyes all eager, his mouth all quirked up like that—what was that?

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"I mean, this is good, right?" Ellis said. "I mean, this is what you want. We're good here—blood brothers like always—right?"

"Well . . . sure," Danny said. He was trying to keep his imagination from going haywire with all these nutso dark thoughts of his. Still, he couldn't help asking, "Hey, did anyone, like . . . say anything to you? About me—or Gina? You know what I mean? Did anyone, you know—give you a hard time about it or anything?"

It seemed to Danny there was a pause then, a strange beat of silence during which Ellis, with his wild stare and his twitching mouth, was about to burst out with some unbelievable news. But he didn't burst out with anything. He laughed his cynical Ellis laugh. He looked down at the tabletop. He said, "Don't be an idiot. I'm telling you, I screwed up. It happens. We're good, right? I mean, we're good, Danny. Aren't we?"

Gina had a studio on the West Side. Her parents helped her pay for it so she wouldn't have to live in a bad neighborhood. The next day, Saturday, Danny set out, meaning to walk over there. Somehow, though, he drifted north. Before he even knew it, he found himself up near the museum. He found himself outside the elegant stone townhouse where Mary lived with her parents and with Tunny.

He passed by slowly, looking up at the large windows. He could see the chandelier in there, burning above the foyer. When he reached the corner, he went around the block and passed by the townhouse again.

He didn't know what to think anymore, what to believe. He did know, and then he didn't. He did believe and then he told himself it was ridiculous. After a while, he couldn't think straight about it. He went around the block yet again, passed the townhouse yet again. As he walked, he slipped into a daydream. In his daydream, he charged angrily up to the front door. He rang the bell firmly. Inside, he looked Tunny right in his smirking face and demanded to see Mary's father. When Mary's father came down the sweeping staircase—wearing one of those fine, silvery suits Danny had seen crime bosses wear on TV—Danny stepped up to him and looked him in the eye.

He did not imagine himself yelling at the man or pointing his finger or talking tough in any way. That was too unrealistic even to daydream. Instead, he was reasonable. He said, "Look, sir, I want to be clear with you. Please—don't do anything for me, okay? I did you a good turn. Now you can do me a good turn by leaving me alone, leaving my friends alone and the people I work with."

"Sure, kid, sure," the older man said in his daydream. "Whatever you say."

"No offense or anything," Danny told him. "I helped your daughter because it was right and—it's all ruined if something wrong

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comes out of it. I don't want to scare anyone or hurt anyone. I just want to live my life and do what's right. That's all."

By the time Danny reached this point in his daydream, he had moved away from the townhouse. He was still working the daydream over, refining it, as he crossed the park towards Gina's place.

They sat on her sofa side by side, close but not touching, shy in spite of all the time they'd spent together, all the working and the jokes.

"I feel pretty stupid," Gina said. She said it with a laugh, but her eyes grew watery.

"No, no," said Danny. "Ellis is a nice guy, he just . . ."

" . . . figured I'd make a good one-night stand. Or one-week stand or whatever."

"No, no. He likes you. He really does. He's told me that a million times. He's just . . . not ready to make a commitment yet, that's all. It's not you, Gina. Really."

She turned her face to him, her pert, pretty face. She gave him a crooked smile. "*You're* a nice guy, Danny. Really. You are."

The thing about Gina's eyes was you could see through them right into her. You could see how tender-hearted she was and vulnerable. She didn't try to hide it. Danny could fashion whole imagined lifetimes out of that look she was giving him right now. He imagined how he would protect her and keep her from the harsh things of the world so that she wouldn't become harsh herself and would be able to give him that look forever, even when they were old.

"All right, pity party's over," she said suddenly. She reached over and clapped her hand down on top of his. "Let's talk about how well you're doing. Division Manager. At your age. I mean, how awesome is that? I'm so glad for you, Danny. Things are going so well for you."

Danny turned his hand so that he could take hold of Gina's. Their fingers intertwined. Her hand was warm and the warmth seemed to travel from her up his arm and all through him.

"And they're just going to get better and better," she said, with her tender eyes on him and her warm hand squeezing his. "I can feel it."

Danny looked at her with all his love. "I can feel it too," he said. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

MURDER IN KEY WEST

by Michael Haskins

A former reporter living on Key West, and now the public information officer for that city, Michael Haskins launches his fiction career with a vivid story set in Key West. *EQMM* has just learned that some characters in this story also appear in the novel Mr. Haskins recently completed. The book has won the Florida Noir Seminar's novel contest.

Tony Whyte's once sparkling blue eyes were lifeless and stared into oblivion; his frozen expression suggested no fear or pain, not even surprise, and his Key West tan had turned ashen. Both hands clutched an old sword blade that had been forced through his chest and impaled him to the boat chair where he died. A small pirate flag hung from its handle.

A puddle of congealed blood sloshed like Jell-O under the chair as the luxurious fifty-foot trawler rocked in its slip. The teak-paneled main cabin appeared neat, only Tony looked out of place, while the sweet stickiness of blood, mixed with the sourness of death, fouled the cabin's air.

I searched for a pulse in his neck, but knew I wouldn't find one. Tony was as cold as granite from a Quincy quarry and almost as hard.

Classical music played from the trawler's satellite radio. I looked at the radio's screen and *Bach, Cello Suite No. 6 in D Major by Pablo Casals* scrolled across it. The music was counterpoint to the cacophony of sounds coming from the Key West Old Town marina outside Schooner Wharf Bar: a mixture of bar patrons' happiness, captains barking orders to crews, tourists shrieking excitement, boat engines revving, and traffic.

I walked outside to breathe the salty air. Too many people had seen me on the boat, so I couldn't walk away. Not that I wanted to. Tony was a guy I had worked with years ago on a newspaper in Puerto Rico. We had taken different roads in life, but two months ago, our paths crossed again in Key West, Florida, my home.

Tony had been sober four years and was writing again. He was

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happy and talked freely of his alcoholism, of waking confused and scared from his blackouts, and how long it had taken him to hit bottom. His journalism career crashed and burned, while mine flourished. Slowly, and sober, Tony had been writing his way back, one day at a time.

I looked inside the cabin and thought again about how neat it was. Tony had been a barfly, a scrapper who knew how to survive, but this time he hadn't. He knew who killed him, but hadn't seen it coming.

I sat in a deck chair and felt the morning sun on my face. Clouds moved across the pale sky and the air smelled of salt water, humidity, and seaweed. Tarpon broke the surface; their splashing echoed around the marina. It smelled a lot better than inside. Lines holding boats in place moaned from stress, and birds cried in protest as the first reef-bound catamarans, filled with tourists waiting to sunburn, left for a day of snorkeling.

The sounds of life vibrated from the marina and harbor walk, while the silence of murder sat quietly in the boat's cabin.

I used my cell phone to call Richard Dowley, the chief of police. Had someone or something from Tony's alcohol-hazy past found him? Or had a murderer with a pirate fetish surfaced in paradise? Murder was almost unheard of in Key West. We were more than a hundred miles from Miami and a million miles from its violence.

The chief, dressed in creased blue slacks and a blue polo shirt with a police logo on its breast, stood with a Styrofoam cup of café con leche, a mixture of strong Cuban coffee with hot milk and lots of sugar, sunglasses perched on his large nose, looking at Tony's body.

Sherlock Corcoran, the crime scene investigator, and Detective Luis Morales, both wearing surgical gloves, looked cautiously around the room. They had turned the boat's air conditioning to high, but the room still held the stench of violent death. Few knew Sherlock's real first name, but the nickname came with his job.

Their business casual conflicted with my cutoff jeans, sleeveless buttoned-down collared shirt, faded pre-World Series Boston Red Sox baseball cap, and flip-flops. I had three good cigars in my pocket and wanted to light one, to help kill the foul air.

"Who was he?" The chief sipped his con leche. "And how do you know him?"

"Tony Whyte." I turned away and looked outside. "Whyte with a Y. Years ago we worked on the same paper in San Juan."

"What's he doing on Wizard's boat?"

"He was helping Wizard and his two partners write their memoirs on discovering the Spanish treasure." It was the truth, but not the whole truth.

When I mentioned the Spanish treasure, Sherlock and Luis stopped and stared at me. The three boat bums—Wizard, Lucky, and Bubba—discovering millions in Spanish treasure in the '70s was

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a Key West legend with little if any truth told with the story. When the new multimillionaires were sober they had varying stories about the discovery and they told other versions when they were drunk, which was often. Their only consistency was their inconsistency.

"Wizard do this?" The chief took a long swallow and finished his con leche.

"No, I don't think so."

"Why?" He took a cigar from my pocket, sniffed it, and smiled.

"Wizard's too frail and this guy is twice his size," Luis said. "He didn't do it. Whoever did it had enough strength to push the sword through a man's ribs."

The chief looked at me and I nodded. Wizard was in his late seventies and had always been a beanpole. In his prime, he had difficulty with a scuba tank until he was in the water.

"Let's talk to him anyway," he said to Luis and handed the cigar back. "Have a car check the bars." He looked at his watch. "There are only a few open this early."

Luis went outside to tell the uniformed officers.

"Awfully neat for a murder." Sherlock opened a cabinet and looked inside. "This the way you found it, Mick?"

"Exactly. I checked Tony for a pulse and then called the chief."

"You couldn't tell he was dead?" Sherlock tried to hide a smile. "I'm going below."

Sherlock walked the narrow steps to the lower section of the trawler.

"You want to tell me anything?" The chief put his empty cup down. "If he's writing the memoir, what are you doing here?"

"He was supposed to get with Wizard at the Breakfast Club at Schooner Wharf. Tony said they had a few things to discuss and then he wanted to talk to me." I turned back toward Tony and wondered what he wanted. "We were gonna meet at Schooner and go have breakfast. When he didn't show up I walked down here and found him like this."

"Maybe Wizard had help," the chief thought aloud.

"No fuss, no mess." I looked around the neat cabin and wished I was outside.

Luis walked in. "A patrol car is looking for him, Chief."

"Sherlock's down below," the chief said and Luis went in search of him.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Go have breakfast at Harpoon Harry's."

"This doesn't bother you?" He seemed surprised.

"Chief, I've covered drug wars, gang wars, revolutions, and riots in L.A., and I've learned to be grateful it ain't my blood on the streets, and appreciate that I'm still alive and capable of being hungry."

"You'll need to come to the station and give Luis a statement," the chief said as I headed toward the deck.

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"You know the guy hates me."

"Yeah, but I love you." He smiled. "Come to the station when he calls."

"Sure." I walked outside, took a deep breath, and fought the urge to look at Tony one last time.

Padre Thomas Collins sat at one of Schooner Wharf's empty thatched-roof patio tables drinking a con leche and eating an egg sandwich on Cuban bread. He wore dark cargo shorts, a faded blue dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up past his elbows, with an opened package of Camel cigarettes in the pocket, and sandals. He motioned me over and pointed to a second Styrofoam cup. I picked it up and was surprised to find it warm.

"For me?"

"I thought you might want it." He looked up and smiled. "What do you think happened?"

Padre Thomas, as he liked to be called, grew up Irish Catholic outside of Boston. He became a missionary priest, had a parish church in Guatemala, and about ten years ago walked away from his rectory. For the past eight years, he has been in Key West. Rumor is he lives on a stipend from the Church, but rumors run rampant around the island and rarely hold any grains of truth. His skin is tanned like leather from riding his bike, his only mode of transportation. He volunteers at a hospice and the Catholic soup kitchen; otherwise his time is his own.

I met Padre Thomas at Schooner Wharf a few months after he first arrived and everyone warned me that he was crazy, because he claimed to see and talk to angels. I believe he sees the angels, but I haven't made up my mind on whether or not he's crazy. He still considers himself a priest, but without a church.

"It's not Wizard." I sat down and took the lid off the con leche.

"I know." He bit into his sandwich. "I think they'll find him having breakfast at Harpoon's."

"Wizard?"

"Yes, I saw him outside there as I left."

"The angels tell you anything about this?" I sipped from the Styrofoam cup.

He looked up with a devilish grin. "Someone is very concerned about the book."

"Who?"

"Someone involved back then. Long before you or I ever thought we'd be in Key West."

"Do you know who it is?"

Padre Thomas shook his head and took another bite of his sandwich. "I warned Wizard yesterday. He told me he had an idea for protecting everyone and was supposed to pass it on to Tony this morning. He wouldn't tell me more, just not to worry."

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"Tony should've worried." I sipped the warm con leche.

Padre Thomas put his sandwich down and lit a cigarette. "Wizard doesn't even know."

"How do you know?"

"He asked me if I had seen Tony."

"What did you say?"

"I told him no." He inhaled deeply. "Because I hadn't."

"Can you help the cops?" I finished the coffee.

"You know I can't." His grin returned. "At first they wouldn't believe anything I told them and then, since I'd give them information only the killer should know, they'd think I did it."

He had a point. In the past, his knowledge of things that happened in secret or dark places had gotten him in trouble. I was one of the few people he confided in, maybe because he knew I believed him about the angels, or at least wanted to.

My cell phone chirped. "Yeah."

"Mick, it's Tracy at the Hog's Breath." The words whispered hoarsely in my ear, like Lauren Bacall talking to Bogey in the movies. "One of those old treasure guys is here looking for you."

"Wizard?" It was too early for the Hog's bar to be open.

"No, the one they call Lucky."

"Where is he?"

"Downstairs." Tracy worked in the office on the second floor. "He left you something, but he's sitting at the bar waiting."

"Thanks, Tracy, I'll be there in a little while." I closed the cell phone.

"All three of those treasure hunters are in danger." Padre Thomas crushed out the cigarette and bit into the last of his sandwich. "Be careful, Mick."

"Tell me something I can use, Padre."

"They've scared someone from back then," he mumbled as he chewed. "Someone who'll kill to keep a secret."

"Thanks for the coffee." I got up and rode my bike down the harbor walk toward the Hog's Breath.

It smelled and felt like rain, the humidity getting thick, as clouds blowing in from the south began to hide the morning sun. Key West had been getting afternoon showers every day for almost a month and they brought a summer mugginess that reminded us we lived in the tropics as well as in the southernmost city in the Continental United States.

The Hog's Breath Saloon is a short block from the waterfront, at Duval and Front Streets, but large hotels block any scenic view of the water. When cruise ships are in port their smokestacks rise above the hotels and are visible from the Hog's outdoor patio bar. It's a friendly place where the bartenders remember your name and what you drink after only a few visits and, because it's out-

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doors, smoking is allowed. I routinely meet friends there for cigars.

The parking lot between the bank and the Hog's Breath had two cars in it and the outdoor bar area looked empty. As I rode in off Duval Street, I thought Lucky must have got tired of waiting and left. I was wrong.

I locked my bike in the bike rack and headed in.

To the right of the parking-lot entrance of the Hog there is a stage, to the left a small raw bar that also serves draught beer. Straight ahead was the large full-service bar with seating on all four sides.

Lucky was sitting on the ground, barstools were turned over, and a sword, thrust through his stomach, impaled him to the bar. A small pirate flag hung from its grip. Lucky's face showed pain and fear. Blood dripped in multiple spots down his T-shirt. I looked around, but there was no one. The con leche turned in my stomach. I walked to the side of the bar that faced the restaurant, so I wouldn't have to see Lucky, and called the chief.

Next, I called Tracy upstairs.

"Tracy, there's going to be some police action downstairs." I took a deep breath. "Stay upstairs, but call Charlie and tell him someone has died at the bar—"

She didn't let me finish. "Mick! Who?"

"You're going to have enough cops upstairs in a little while, just call Charlie and prepare yourself. . . ."

"For what?" The gravelly whisper began to sound nervous. "What's happening?"

"Call Charlie, Tracy, and don't mention my package, please. All you know is Lucky asked for me, so you called me, nothing else. The cops are on their way. Put the package in the safe, please." I disconnected the call and lit a cigar. I needed the package and I trusted Tracy to put it away and keep our secret, but knew it would cost me a lunch and twenty questions in a day or two.

A squad car screeched into the parking lot, lights flashing and siren wailing. The chief pulled in a few seconds behind and had the cop turn them off. He held the uniformed officer back and walked toward me. He stopped and looked down at Lucky, then motioned me to meet him.

"You said he was Lucky." He shook his head. "I guess he isn't anymore."

I chomped on the cigar, but there wasn't the foul odor that the boat cabin had, I was just nervous.

The chief got closer and bent down to the body. "Stab wounds," he said, more to himself than to me.

"There's a trail of blood from the raw bar to where you are." I pointed to small splatters of blood on the cracked concrete floor.

"Why are you here?" He stood up. "Were you meeting him, too?"

"I was having coffee with Padre Thomas and Tracy from upstairs here called and told me Lucky was here looking for me."

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"The crazy priest! Don't you know any normal people?" He shook his head and watched the crime-scene van drive in. "Did you touch anything? The sword?"

"You're the most normal person I know, Chief, and no, I didn't touch anything."

Sherlock stopped at the entrance and looked down at Lucky. He scanned the stage and the raw bar and he saw the blood spatters. He walked to where they began and waved the chief over. Pretending he was holding a sword, Sherlock twirled his wrist and thrust forward like Errol Flynn in an old swashbuckling movie, forcing the chief backward.

"Tell me something." He stabbed forward and the chief backed up. "Tell me something, tell me something," he repeated as he thrust forward. In four or five steps the chief had his back against the stage railing and Sherlock turned him to the bar. "Tell me something," he yelled and the chief almost tripped over Lucky.

"The killer is getting messy and nervous," Sherlock said, dropping his imaginary sword. "There was a conversation, he didn't like what he heard, or didn't hear, and killed the guy quickly and cleanly on the boat. Here, he stabbed the vic—" he looked down at the body—"maybe six times from what I can see. He's after something or someone and he's getting nervous. Who's left of the three?"

"Wizard is back at the station, so we know he didn't do this." The chief looked at me. "The other old guy is Bubba?"

"Yeah." I sat back down. "If he's not on his boat, he's probably at a bar."

The chief took Sherlock's radio and called dispatch. He wanted Bubba picked up.

"What is it with the swords and pirate flags?" Sherlock checked behind the body.

"You know their story about finding the treasure, right?"

"Yeah, I've heard so many versions, I don't believe any of them."

"You're probably right." I took the cigar out of my mouth. "Tony was helping them write their memoirs and my guess is someone's afraid of something in the story."

"Why?" The chief moved closer.

"If I knew that, I'd know who the killer is, wouldn't I?"

"This sword looks as old as the other one." Sherlock studied the sword handle. "There can't be that many pirate swords on the island . . . maybe we're looking for a collector."

"Since the Pirate Soul museum opened there's no shortage of replicas," I said.

"Damn." He stood up. "Two bodies, two swords, it's gotta be the same killer." He pointed toward the sword and pirate flag. "And he's scared. That makes him all the more dangerous. Unless you've got an idea about a suspect, Chief, I think you need to call FDLE."

"Yeah." He sat on a barstool, his back to the body. "But let's give

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our detectives a few hours on their own, maybe they'll come up with a suspect."

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement is like a state FBI and is used often by small municipalities in the Florida Keys when major crimes occur. Sherlock regularly uses the FDLE crime lab in his investigations.

"Someone at the marina must have seen something," I added in support.

"You're right there, Mick," Sherlock answered a little too quickly. "People saw you, but no one saw anyone before you got on the boat."

I stuffed the cigar back in my mouth. "Well, then, they didn't see Tony get on, either. If they missed him, why not the killer?"

Two police cars pulled to a stop in the parking lot. It was time for the investigation to get going and I knew that meant talking to Tracy.

"Give your statement to the officer outside," the chief said. "And come to the station when Luis calls you. Any idea why Lucky was looking for you here when the bar's not open?"

"None," I lied.

"You were lookin' for the first vic and he got himself killed," Sherlock said flatly, "you were comin' to meet this vic, and he's dead. Do me a favor, Mick, go home and stop lookin' for people!"

I didn't go home, because I needed the package Lucky had left with Tracy. A section of the sky filled with rain clouds, but to the north, the sun shone. I rode my bike to Harpoon Harry's, knowing it would be hours before the police finished at the Hog's Breath.

The breakfast crowd had gone and it was too early for the lunch bunch, so I grabbed a table in back and Ron, the owner, brought me a mug of black coffee and the menu. I ordered an egg-and-cheese sandwich on Cuban bread.

"You mind if I join you?"

Attorney Shawn Eden stood there, a warm smile spread across his freshly shaved face. I was pouring sugar into my coffee and pointed at the empty seat across from me.

Shawn is a big man, in size and in the community. His thick mop of hair has turned gray, but once it was as black as his attorney's heart. His family has been in the Keys forever; he's a Conch, the name given to local families that have lived here for generations. His dress code is colorful print shirts, creased linen pants, and expensive loafers without socks.

Ron brought him a mug of coffee and Shawn waved off the menu.

"A shame about your friend," he said and poured four spoons of sugar into his coffee. "I talked with him recently about my backing the treasure hunters." He couldn't stifle a laugh. "I don't mean to be disrespectful, but those guys were anything but treasure hunters."

I sipped my coffee. "You made a lot of money off their treasure,

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Counselor."

"I met the three of them back in the 'sixties." He closed his eyes. "More than forty years ago. I was fresh out of law school and I had my degree. What you see here in Key West today, that's not what it was like when I came home." He pointed toward the harbor and Waterfront Market. "That area there was filled with shrimp boats, PT's was a tough country-western bar. And the shrimpers weren't bringing in much shrimp, but they had a lot of square groupers to unload." He laughed again. "God, what a town this used to be."

Square groupers are bales of marijuana. Key West businessmen backed local fishermen and they made fortunes bringing in loads of marijuana from mother ships offshore. It went on into the 1980s, but then the smugglers switched to cocaine and the rules changed. The money was better, but DEA and Customs agents were in Key West and family men were going away to do hard time in far-off jails. It stopped being a sport everyone was involved in about that time.

"You're right, though, I made good money off their treasure." He sipped the coffee. "I never thought I would. I saw the three of them as colorful characters and tried to help them out with money. I thought of it as a handout, they considered it an investment in their businesses."

"Then you're lucky they looked at it that way."

"Well, yeah. For the derelict drunkards and liars they were, or are," he smiled, "they turned out to be men of their words."

"They sign anything?" I began to nibble at my sandwich.

"Never, we shook hands." He closed his eyes again. "I backed their bringing conch in from the Bahamas and they scuttle their boat on some sandbar and ended up eating most of the conch before the Coast Guard found them. I paid for them to get their captain's licenses so they could use one of their boats to take tourists to the reef. Hell, Mick, there had to be a dozen other schemes. I remember the day they walked into my office with some of their treasure and wanted me to be their partner."

"They needed money."

"You got that right. In all, I probably put in a little more than fifty grand." He grinned. "What a return on that investment."

"You know Lucky was murdered too." I watched him for a reaction. I didn't see one, but then he's an attorney and I am not sure they react to anything other than billing hours.

"Yeah, I got a call from the police."

Shawn's contacts went into all city departments and many local businesses, because he and his family owned a variety of businesses in Key West and the Upper Keys.

He broke off a piece of my sandwich and ate it. "Everyone knows I handle their legal affairs. I do that pro bono, too."

"The cops have the Wizard and they're looking for Bubba."

"I know these guys, they couldn't kill anyone. They might drown

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you by mistake," he laughed, "but they couldn't kill anyone."

"Maybe it has something to do with the book?"

"The book! Mick, it wouldn't be a memoir, it would be a work of fiction. They haven't been in their right minds for forty years. Is that what the cops think?"

"I have no idea what the cops think."

"Yeah, but you found both bodies."

"I can't argue that, Counselor, and I think I'm Sherlock's number-one suspect."

"You're another one I'd lay money on couldn't kill someone."

"You know me, Shawn, I believe in running away so I can run another day."

"A man after my own heart. Hey, I need to get to the police station and see they aren't using a rubber hose on Wizard. I'll see you around." He stood up, said something to Ron, and left.

I drank another cup of coffee, but still had a couple of hours before I could go back and get what Lucky had left with Tracy.

Light rain wet one side of Caroline Street as I rode my bike toward Simonton Street, where I turned, and then turned again on Fleming Street, going against the one-way traffic. The rain stayed at the waterfront. I locked my bike in front of Island Books.

Books, shelved and in stacks, filled the narrow store. Books about Key West, its history, and its characters ran along the right wall, and there were signed books by Key West authors on a display as you first came into the shop. New books, used books, picture books filled the store. In the next room, the condition was the same, books and more books.

I saw Mitch's head through the open door to his small office in the back; he was working at his computer. There was no one at the register and two customers wandered through the store.

"You're here early," Mitch said. He must have had eyes in the back of his head.

"Have you heard about the two murders?"

He turned in his book-cramped office and stared at me. "In Key West?" Classical music played lightly from his computer speakers.

"Yeah, in Key West."

"Tell me." He pushed his glasses up on his nose and waited.

I told him and he listened quietly.

"Any suspects? I mean, besides you."

"Thanks," I said. "I don't know what they've done in the last few hours, maybe they do, maybe they don't."

"Are you hiding out?" He twisted in his chair.

"When they call me to come in for questioning I'll go in."

"Really? Take an attorney."

"I don't need one."

"Famous last words. Look, if they've got no one else, then it has

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to be you. I beg your pardon, but that's how it works."

"I don't think so, Mitch. I have witnesses, there's no physical evidence. . . ."

"Coincidence, Mick." He pushed his glasses back in place and stood up. "Take my advice and don't go to the police station without legal representation, coincidence has put others in jail."

Outside, I lit another cigar and decided to walk along Duval Street toward the Hog's Breath. I could see the rain clouds hovering at Lower Duval. Cars and scooters rushed in both directions and the sidewalks were busy with tourists. Outside Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville Restaurant, people were lined up for lunch seating. At Fat Tuesday's early revelers enjoyed the toxic frozen drinks they served and across Caroline Street Fogerty's had its first lunch group seated. The island was busy for mid-week. Rain was a block away.

The two-hundred block of Duval was the party area, be it spring break or Fantasy Fest or any day of the week with a D in it. The Tree Bar, Angelina's Pizza, and Rick's were open and busy. Across the street, the Lazy Gecko, Sloppy Joe's Bar, and Irish Kevin's were just as busy. This block of Key West sold a good time by the glass and there was no shortage of takers. Rain drizzled across Greene Street like a beaded curtain.

The bank's parking lot was full and the afternoon entertainment had begun at the Hog's Breath. Joel Nelson sat on the rain-protected stage and played for a half-full bar. We nodded at each other as I walked in. The bloodstains on the broken cement floor had been washed away and all the barstools were upright. Kevin tended the raw bar and Irish Bob was alone behind the big bar.

"Interesting morning," Irish Bob said as I passed.

"How long have you been open?"

"About an hour." He smiled. "You gonna tell me about it?"

"Later, I need to go to the office," I said, and kept walking.

Tracy was alone.

"You owe me." She smiled, and put down what she was working on. "Hold on."

I closed the door as she walked into the back room. She came back holding a manila envelope, which she handed to me. "What's in it?"

I opened the envelope and six audiotapes and a note from Tony slid out. I put them back.

"Thanks, Tracy. I'll let you know as soon as I listen to them. You okay?"

"Are you okay?" She sat down. "Morales had a lot of questions about you. I told him what I did, called you, and that was it. The son of a bitch doesn't believe me."

"His job is to be suspicious. Don't let him get to you."

"I had to sign my statement."

"Consider yourself lucky. I have to go to the station to give mine."

I stuffed the envelope against my back and walked out

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into the rain.

Tony's note echoed what Shawn had said about the book having better prospects of being a mystery novel than a memoir. The afternoon rain pounded the deck on my sailboat, the *Fenian Bastard,* as I pulled my small tape recorder from storage and played the tapes. I poured some Jameson over ice and sipped the drink as I listened.

The three treasure hunters had sat with Tony and told their stories, each cutting in on the other to make corrections, because they never seemed to agree. The most interesting parts were about smuggling marijuana and who had financed their frequent trips. They even named some of the Mexican boaters on the mother ship, as well as local backers, but again, they argued about that. Much of the information had been rumored for years around the island, so there was little new in the tapes.

It was almost humorous when they talked about discovering the treasure. They were diving, illegally, for local lobsters when they discovered the first few artifacts. It took them weeks of scraping the bottom by hand to find more, and then they took it to Shawn. They all respected Shawn for his years of support and always considered him their business partner.

I put a blank tape in my recorder, put my Glock, with a round in the chamber, in the pocket of my foul-weather jacket with the recorder, and called Chief Dowley. I told him where to meet me and left as the rain turned to drizzle. I had a good idea of who the killer was, but it didn't make any sense. Then again, murder rarely does.

Lightning flashed and thunder boomed as I walked into the plush empty outer office. The inside door was open and classical music played from hidden speakers. I unzipped my jacket and turned the tape recorder on as I walked through the open office door and closed it. Shawn sat at his clear glass-topped desk; a coke spoon in his hand came down empty from his nose. A small bag of white powder and a revolver sat on the desk.

"Do you want some?" His eyes stared hard at me, but he smiled.

"No, Shawn, I have a hard enough time being a drunk."

"This is better than booze." He filled the small coke spoon and inhaled it through one nostril. "You have the tapes?"

"Yeah, I have them."

"The crazy bastards," he growled. "I didn't think they'd turn on me."

"They didn't."

He looked puzzled for a moment and then smiled again. "What do you mean?"

"You were right, Shawn." I moved away from the desk. "Mostly they argued on the tapes. Talked about their smuggling and joked about finding the treasure."

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"They lied about me and my family, I know they did." He was becoming agitated.

"No, they didn't, Shawn," I tried to say calmly. "There are more rumors out on the street about how Key West families got their money from square groupers than are on the tapes."

"That's what Tony said. I didn't believe him, either."

"He told you that before you killed him?"

"Yeah," he growled again. "Now you're saying he told me the truth?"

"He wasn't going to write the memoir, he wanted to use the information for a mystery novel." I moved another step back.

"That's good news, but it's a little late." His laugh sounded like an animal's howl. "Of course, it's not good news for you, is it? You know the truth." He inhaled another spoonful of cocaine. "I have to kill you, and then this will go away."

"Are you going to run me through with a pirate sword, too?" I stood still and put my hand on the Glock.

"No, the swords are gone." He smiled. "Wizard had two of them and Tony made me so angry I just picked one up and drove it through him as he went to sit down."

"You took the other one with you to kill Lucky?" I wanted it all on tape.

"Tony told me Lucky was taking the tapes to you, so I went after him," he said quietly. "I didn't realize I had the other sword with me until I got to my car. I drove around and saw Lucky walk into the Hog and I parked around on Front Street." His hand was shaking so much he couldn't hold the coke spoon. "I waited for him by the parking lot and when he came downstairs, I confronted him, and I still had the sword. He wouldn't go back for the tapes. Damn fool, he didn't think I'd do it, even after I stabbed him a few times."

"Shawn, it has to stop. You're connected enough to cop a manslaughter plea," I said for the tape recorder. "Turn yourself in."

He howled again and stood up, the revolver in his quivering hand. "It stops when you disappear, no sword, no body."

"It will be messy in here, Shawn, blood and noise."

"Let me worry about that," he said and stepped away from the desk. "Where are the tapes?"

"On my boat. You gonna go get them?" I watched his gun hand tremble.

"Unless you want to take me there," he laughed cruelly, his eyes wide.

I backed up; I wanted distance between us. "You were wrong to worry about the book, Shawn, and wrong about me, too."

"Wrong about you, how?" He moved back toward a file cabinet, but held the gun aimed at me.

"I can kill, Shawn," I said calmly. "I can't run a sword through an innocent man, like you did, but I can kill to protect myself."

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"Yeah? But I have the gun."

"Wrong again, Shawn." I kept calm and smiled. "I have a gun in my pocket and it's aimed at you."

"Show it to me," he challenged me angrily. "I don't believe you."

"Put the gun down, Shawn, and we'll both be alive when the police arrive."

"I still don't believe you," and he fired one shot that went past my left shoulder, his hand trembled so. "Damn you!" He fired again and missed.

The two shots echoed and the room smelled of burnt cordite.

I fired the Glock and hit him square in the chest. The cocaine rush kept him standing, but he looked down at the growing blood-stain on his flowery shirt and then back at me. He raised his arm up, ready to fire again. I had the gun out of my pocket and pointed at him. I shook my head.

"No, Shawn, drop it." He didn't, and I shot him again, and my ears rang from the noise.

He fell against the file cabinet and slid to the floor. The door behind me crashed against the office wall as Chief Dowley rushed in, gun in hand. He looked at me and then at Shawn, who died with a cocaine smile.

"Damn, Mick, I hope you're right," he said softly. "You just killed an important guy."

I pulled the tape recorder out of my pocket and handed it to him. I heard sirens from outside. "Yeah, in self-defense and I solved two murders for you."

He took my Glock, put it on a chair, and then rewound the tape. Two uniformed officers came in, guns drawn.

"Call the paramedics," he told them and led me into the outer office. "He confesses on this?"

"And fired first, it's all there."

He placed the recorder next to his ear and played the tape. He smiled. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I hoped I was wrong."

"So why call me to meet you here?"

"If I was wrong I was gonna buy you a beer."

He put the recorder in his pocket and talked to the uniformed officer at the door. Then he waved me over and led me outside.

"Let me buy you a drink. After all, this is Key West, not Miami, and you ain't goin' anywhere. Hell, Mick, it's been one long day—" He put his arm around my shoulder—"and I can use a beer. Then we have to go see Luis for your statement."

"The guy hates me, Chief." I allowed him to tug me toward the street.

"Yeah, but I still love you."

"What about my gun?"

"It's in an evidence bag," he said and we walked away in the rain. ●

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What happens when three very different authors are inspired by the same idea for a short story? Take "Wheeze" and the two stories that follow it in this issue, "Say That Again" and "The Old Story"; they're proof that from a common seed distinctive fictional creations will grow. The article that set all three of these stories' authors going appeared in the newspaper *The Week* (Hagen, Germany): *"Pensioner gang on trial: Three geriatric criminals have gone on trial accused of carrying out a string of armed robberies across western Germany. Rudi Richter, 74, Wilfried Ackerman, 73, and Lotha Ackerman, 64, have admitted taking part in 14 robberies that earned them a total of 1.3m euros. They began robbing banks in 1988, but were forced to stop the next year when Wilfried was arrested and sent to prison for ten years. In 2000, they reformed, and reached their peak 3 years later, scooping a quarter of a million euros in five heists. Age, however, eventually caught up with them. 'Rudi couldn't really get up the stairs anymore and we constantly had to stop so he could go to the toilet,' said Wilfried. At first, police assumed they were looking for younger men; they realized their mistake when a witness reported hearing the thieves wheezing."*

WHEEZE

by Michael Z. Lewin

Georgina Bladen was upstairs ironing. Usually she ironed downstairs when she had the house to herself, in front of the big television. But today there was a chance—just a chance—that Barry would stop home after lunch before he headed for Fraserton. His meeting with Jim Pinney was important, and Barry liked to look right when a meeting was important.

Mind you, it really depended on how long he spent lunching at Maxie's. As well as looking right, Barry liked to feel good about himself before a meeting, and Maxie's flattery would do *that* trick.

Probably best known in the U.S. for his P.I. Albert Samson books, of which the most recent was *Eye Opener* (Five Star/'04), Michael Z. Lewin has pursued many other writing projects over the years. He's a regular contributor of dramas to BBC radio, an author of children's books, and someone who has toured throughout the U.S. with presentations on writing. †

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Georgina had long since given up worrying about whether Barry was having a thing with Maxie. In a town the size of Roseville surely someone would have seen them and shared the observation. And, knowing the way Barry thought and operated, Georgina would only begin to worry if he *stopped* lunching at Maxie's little cafe, dirty as the place was.

Georgina sighed.

With Barry's shirts done, she thought about taking a break before going on to his undershirts and boxers. Maybe a cup of the chamomile tea that Floella brought back from her last trip out of state would be calming. Not that Georgina felt she needed calming, but it was good to experience new things. She could make the tea and then call Flo to report how she'd liked it. Yes; that would work. Downstairs making tea, she could easily hear Barry's car if it did pull in. She could be upstairs again before he got into the house. Not as fast as he used to be, Barry.

Not that he minded her having a break or being downstairs. It was having her ironing equipment clutter up the living room in front of his High Definition that bothered him. It made no sense to Georgina but it wasn't worth rowing about again. She switched the bedroom TV off and turned to the door.

And she heard something.

Her first, shocked, reaction was that it was Barry. But it couldn't be, not yet. Could it? She looked at the alarm clock. No, no. So maybe it was one of those creepy creaky house sounds.

But then she heard the sound again and it was *human.* A wheeze.

Barry might not be as young as he liked to think he was, but he didn't wheeze. Especially not since he'd lost weight and started going to the gym.

Still, Georgina doubted herself. How could she be hearing a wheeze? If Barry were here, in the bedroom with her, and she asked him to go downstairs, he'd tell her not to be stupid.

Was she being stupid?

And then she heard the wheeze again.

Who could it be? The house was always unlocked, as they mostly were in Roseville, but no one popped in without calling out a greeting as they came through the door.

And no one Georgina knew wheezed. It was a real puzzle. Surely it couldn't be a burglar or anything big-city like that. And if it was, what did one do?

She picked up the iron. She went toward the bedroom door, but the iron jerked, and almost fell out of her hand. Silly Georgina. It had to be unplugged before she could hit somebody with it.

At the bottom of the stairs, iron in hand, Georgina heard more

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sounds, from her dining room. Or maybe they came from beyond it, in her kitchen.

"Hello?" she called. "Who's there?"

Her grip on the iron grew tighter. It was absurd to think she was in danger—not in *Roseville*—but you never knew. Look at all those murders they covered on those *CSI*s. Sometimes more than one in a show. She shivered.

"Hello?" she called again.

In the doorway between kitchen and dining room Georgina found an old woman.

The old woman wore a brown fabric coat. A little blue hat sat on her gray head. As Georgina saw the woman, the woman saw her.

"Fredericka?" the woman said.

"Who?" Georgina said.

"Fredericka? Is that you? You look so different." Some foam appeared at the corner of the old woman's mouth.

Georgina felt a moment of panic.

"Fredericka," the old woman said again, but this time there was hostility in her voice, anger. "What have you done with Connie? She's only three, you know." And the woman began to move forward, waving the hand that wasn't holding her floppy cloth shoulder bag.

What is wrong with her? Georgina thought. And then she realized what the problem must be. Oh, the poor thing.

But what should she do about it? Oh God. Oh God!

It was just then that Barry's car pulled into the driveway.

The old woman peered at Georgina. "You're not Fredericka," she said.

"No, dear. I'm not."

"So what are you doing in my house? Are you collecting for charity, because I'll tell you now . . ." And the old woman stopped to catch her breath. "Howard gives at the office."

With Barry about to come in to help, Georgina felt a wave of confidence and even a protective feeling about this poor old person. Like as not, Barry would call the police, or chuck the poor drooling old dear out on the street. How frightening that would be for her. Georgina sympathized.

She moved forward to put her sympathetic arm around the old lady. It was then she saw a piece of paper fastened with a safety pin to the brown coat. It read, "If you are reading this, then my wife must have gotten out of the motel room. I'm real sorry she's been a bother. She's no harm, but if you give me a call or drop her at the Sunset Motel on Danforth Street, Room 116, I'd be beholden." The note finished with a phone number.

"What have you done with Fredericka?" the old woman asked.

Barry was not in a good mood. He'd been just fine as he left

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Maxie's—Maxie treated a man with a bit of respect. But now, to have to make this godawful stop at the Sunset Motel on his way to see Jim Pinney . . . Who knew what consequences there'd be for his equilibrium, his judgment at the meeting? Never mind that the Sunset was on the very route he took to drive to Fraserton. A man had to be on his absolute tippy-tippy toes to get the better of Jim Pinney.

"Oh, *please,*" Georgina had said. "I'm sure I can't handle something like this by myself. And you can just drop her at reception if you don't want to look around for Room 116."

Barry looked at the gray lumpy figure in the passenger seat of his nearly new low-mileage Escape. The old woman was staring straight ahead, as she had since being loaded into the car.

Oh well. As long as there wasn't a problem getting her out. As long as 116 wasn't empty when he knocked.

They came to the motel and Barry pulled in. For the first time his passenger turned from staring straight ahead. "Lipstick," she said.

"What?"

The old woman turned back to stare through the windshield.

Barry pulled up in front of Room 116. No need to ask where it was—he knew the layout of the Sunset. He unhooked the old woman's seatbelt and went around the car to the passenger door. Opening it, he prised the woman out easily. He directed her by a shoulder to the room and knocked, fully prepared to dash away if no one responded.

But a moment later the door opened and a stout, bald old man said, "Gladys! Thank God! Oh, thank you, sir, thank you."

Barry suddenly felt he'd been needlessly petty. "Not at all," he said. "It was on my way. Pretty much."

"Wherever did you find her?"

"On Redfield Drive—halfway across town. She was in the house, frightened the life out of my wife." Barry nearly mentioned the drool, but decided not to.

The old man's eyes teared. "I'm so sorry." He took Gladys's hand and led her gently into the room.

"Fredrick?" Gladys said. "What's happened to Connie?"

"I don't know what I'm going to do," the old man said to Barry. "I just don't know."

Barry said, "Maybe . . . get some help?"

"But where?" The old man retreated into the room and the door closed.

Barry went back to his car and settled himself in the driver's seat. He flipped the mirror down and checked his tie, and his hair. And then he checked the side of his neck.

There was, indeed, a small spot of Maxie's lipstick.

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Ollie Cornbach was late for work. He leapt out of his car, pausing only to straighten his tie and his jacket. He headed into the Sheriff's Department. Debbie Fry didn't speak as she passed him going the other way. Stuck-up bitch, Ollie thought.

She was such a *sore* loser. Not his fault if she hadn't actually asked him if he was married before she hopped into the sack with him. In fact he'd probably helped her out, in the long run. She'd know in the future not to try to sleep her way to a promotion in the first week of a new job. She'd know next time to wait awhile, wait till she knew how the guys in the hierarchy were fixed. Till she knew the lay of the land, so to speak.

The lay of the land. That was good. Ollie would try to remember to tell it to Lou in the diner mid-shift. Lou, his best friend from Roseville High. He'd gone away for a while, Lou. But now he was back. And maybe when his convictions had expired Ollie could get him onto the force. Maybe in Debbie's place, if the stuck-up bitch held on to the job for that long before transferring to pastures new.

Ollie strode into the deputy's office. "Sorry, sorry, Wayne. Last-minute emergency at home."

"So last-minute you forgot to zip up afterward?"

Ollie looked down and checked his fly.

"Gotcha," Wayne said, rising from behind the desk. "But I think you just told me more than I want to know about why you were late."

"A man's gotta do . . ." Ollie said with a grin.

"Well, a man's gotta do a lotta paperwork tonight," Wayne said.

"Yeah? What's happened?"

"Crime wave."

Ollie perked up. Was it his chance to crack a big one at last? He had ambitions to work for the state police, but without a degree he'd be stuck in the slow lane forever unless he could crack a big one.

"Mrs. Parriton had her jewelry box emptied this morning."

"Mrs. who?"

"And the Larovics lost cash and some kinda old Indian artefaction."

"The who?"

"And John Baker came home to find some Olde English figurines gone, and his jade cufflinks missing, and a gold Mexican dish vanished. What's a gold dish? D'ya know?"

Ollie was frowning. "What's going on?"

"We've had fourteen reports of thefts today."

"But we don't get that many in a month." He considered. "In a year, most years."

"Well, we got it today. I processed six of the reports but the other eight are awaiting your personal attention."

"Hell's bells." Maybe no visit to Lou at the diner tonight after all.

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"While you were out in town today," Wayne asked, "you didn't see a gang of bikers or anything, did you?" The phone began to ring. "That's probably another one, Deputy Cornbach." Wayne slipped his jacket on. "Have fun."

"No," Ollie said, about the bikers. He had been out in town, but he hadn't seen a damn thing out of the ordinary. He dropped into the seat at the desk. "I didn't see a damn thing." He picked up the phone. "Roseville Sheriff's Office."

"She nearly got caught," Frank said to Beverley.

"Shut up and drive," Margaret said sharply. But something caught in her throat and in trying to clear it she began to wheeze.

"I'm just saying," Frank said.

"Well, *I* had an easy time," Beverley said. She was short, round, and wore her graying hair long and straight.

"What do you think the pickings will come to today?" Margaret asked, her breathing under control again.

"You should have seen her, though, Bev," Frank said with a smile. "When she got returned to the room she looked great. How did you do that drool, Marg? The guy who brought you in was *really* spooked."

"Natural talent," Margaret said. "You know, I was thinking . . ."

"There's a first," Frank said. "Just kidding."

"I was thinking that what we are doing is really a contribution to homeland security. All these small-town people leave their doors open, their cars running when they go to the drugstore for a lotto ticket. They have no attitude of alertness. What would happen if al-Qaeda came to Roseville? Security is all about vigilance."

"Yeah, right," Bev said. "Justify it however you want, sweetie. But we're making money for ourselves."

"That too," Margaret said. "I was just saying." She coughed, and stifled a wheeze. There was a chance if it got too bad, Frank and Bev would make her be the one to stay in the motel room while they went out, despite the fact that old women at the money end were less risky because they were less threatening.

"Well," Frank said, "it's my grandson's birthday next month. And you know what greedy little beggars kids are these days because of the TV they watch."

The women chimed, "Amen."

"So," he said, "where's next? Who's got the map?" ●

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SAY THAT AGAIN

by Peter Lovesey

We called him "the Brigadier with the buggered ear." Just looking at it made you wince. Really he should have had the bits surgically removed. He claimed it was an old war wound. However, Sadie the Lady, another of our residents, told us it wasn't true. She said she'd talked to the Brig's son Arnold, who reckoned his old man got blind drunk in Aldershot one night and tripped over a police dog and paid for it with his shell-like.

Because of his handicap, the Brigadier tended to shout. His "good" ear wasn't up to much, even with the aid stuck in it. We got used to the shouting, we old farts in the Never-Say-Die Retirement Home. After all, most of us are hard of hearing as well. No doubt we were guilty of letting him bluster and bellow without interruption. We never dreamed at the time that our compliance would get us into the High Court on a murder rap.

A winner of the Cartier Diamond Dagger, the CWA's lifetime achievement award, Peter Lovesey is a longtime contributor to *EQMM* and a former winner of our Readers Award. The following story emerged from a seminar he and friends Michael Z. Lewin and Liza Cody presented at a crime writers' conference in Britain—one of many projects the three have participated in together. Mr. Lovesey's latest novel is *The Circle* (Soho Crime). †

It was set in motion by She-Who-Must-Be-Replaced, our so-called matron, pinning a new leaflet on the notice board in the hall.

"Infernal cheek!" the Brig boomed. "They're parasites, these people, living off the frail and weak-minded."

"Who are you calling weak-minded?" Sadie the Lady piped up. "There's nothing wrong with my brain."

The Brig didn't hear. Sometimes it can be a blessing.

"Listen to this," he bellowed, as if we had any choice. "'Are you dissatisfied with your hearing? Struggling with a faulty instrument? Picking up unwanted background noise? Marcus Haliburton, a renowned expert on the amazing new digital hearing aids, will be in attendance all day at the Bay Tree Hotel on Thursday,

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8th April, for free consultations. Call this number now for an appointment. No obligation.' No obligation, my arse—forgive me, ladies. You know what happens? They get you in there and tell you to take out your National Health aid so they can poke one of those little torches in your ear and of course you're stuffed. You can't hear a thing they're saying from that moment on. The next thing is they shove a form in front of you and you find you've signed an order for a thousand-pound replacement. If you object they drop your NHS aid on the floor and tread on it."

"That can't be correct," Miss Martindale said.

"Completely wrecked, yes," the Brigadier said. "Are you speaking from personal experience, my dear? Because I am."

Someone put up a hand. He wanted to be helped to the toilet, but the Brigadier took it as support. "Good man. What we should do is teach these blighters a lesson. We could, you know, with my officer training and George's underworld experience."

I smiled faintly. My underworld links were nil, another of the Brig's misunderstandings. One afternoon I'd been talking to Sadie about cats and happened to mention that we once adopted a stray. I thought the Brig was dozing in his armchair, but he came to life and said, "Which of the Krays was that—Reggie or Ronnie? I had no idea of your criminal past, George. We'll have to watch you in future."

It was hopeless trying to disillusion him, so I settled for my gangster reputation and some of the old ladies began to believe it, too, and found me more interesting than ever they'd supposed.

By the next tea break, the Brigadier had turned puce with excitement. "I've mapped it out," he told us. "I'm calling it Operation Syringe, because we're going to clean these ruffians out. Basically, the object of the plan is to get a new super-digital hearing aid for everyone in this home free of charge."

"How the heck will you do that?" Sadie asked.

"What?"

She stepped closer and spoke into his ear. "They're a private company. Those aids cost a fortune."

The Brig grinned. "Simple. We intercept their supplies. I happen to know the Bay Tree Hotel quite well."

Sadie said to the rest of us, "That's a fact. The Legion has its meetings there. He's round there every Friday night for his G and T."

"G and T or two or three," another old lady said.

I said, "Wait a minute, Brigadier. We can't steal a bunch of hearing aids." I have a carrying voice when necessary and he heard every word.

"'Steal' is not a term in the military lexicon, dear boy," he said. "We requisition them." He leaned forward. "Now, the operation has three phases. Number One: Observation. I'll take care of that. Number Two: Liaison. This means getting in touch with an inside man, Cormac, the barman. I can do that also. Number Three:

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Action. And that depends on what we learn from Phases One and Two. That's where the rest of you come in. Are you with me?"

"I don't know what he's on about," Sadie said to me.

"Don't worry," I said. "He's playing soldiers, that's all. He'll find out it's a nonstarter."

"No muttering in the ranks," the Brigadier said. "Any dissenters? Fall out, the dissenters."

No one moved. Some of us needed help to move anywhere and nobody left the room when tea and biscuits were on offer. And that was how we were recruited into the snatch squad.

On Saturday, the Brigadier reported on Phases One and Two of his battle plan. He marched into the tea room looking as chipper as Montgomery on the eve of El Alamein.

"Well, the obbo phase is over and so is the liaison and I'm able to report some fascinating results. The gentleman who wants us all to troop along to the Bay Tree Hotel and buy his miraculous hearing aids is clearly doing rather well out of it. He drives a vintage Bentley and wears a different suit each visit and by the cut of them they're not off the peg."

"There's money in ripping off old people," Sadie said.

"It ought to be stopped," her friend Briony said.

The Brig went on, "I talked to my contact last night and I'm pleased to tell you that the enemy—that is to say, Marcus Haliburton—works to a predictable routine. He puts in a fortnightly appearance at the Bay Tree. If you go along and see him you'll find Session One is devoted to the consultation and the placing of the order. Session Two is the fitting and payment. Between Sessions One and Two a box is delivered to the hotel and it contains up to fifty new hearing aids—more than enough for our needs." He paused and looked around the room. "So what do you think is the plan?"

No one was willing to say. Some might have thought speaking up would incriminate them. Others weren't capable of being heard by the Brigadier. Finally I said, "We, em, requisition the box?"

"Ha!" He lifted a finger. "I thought you'd say that. We can do better. What we do is requisition the box."

There were smiles all round at my expense.

"And then," the Brigadier said, "we replace the box with one just like it."

"That's neat," Sadie said. She was beginning to warm to the Brigadier's criminal scheme.

He'd misheard her again. "It may sound like deceit to you, madam, but to some of us it's common justice. They called Robin Hood a thief."

"Are we going to be issued with bows and arrows?" Sadie said.

"I wouldn't mind meeting some merry men," Briony said.

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The Brigadier's next move took us all by surprise. "Check the corridor, George. Make sure no staff are about."

I did as I was told and gave the thumbs-up sign, whereupon the old boy bent down behind the sideboard and dragged out a flattened cardboard box that he rapidly restored to its normal shape.

"Thanks to my contacts at the hotel I've managed to retrieve the box that was used to deliver this week's aids." No question: He intended to go through with this crazy adventure. In the best officer tradition he started to delegate duties. "George, your job will be to get this packed and sealed and looking as if it just arrived by courier."

"No problem," I said to indulge him. I was sure the plan would break down before I had to do anything.

"That isn't so simple as it sounds," he said. "Take a close look. The aids are made in South Africa, so there are various customs forms attached to the box. They stuff them in a kind of envelope and stick them to the outside. What you do is update this week's documents."

"I'll see what I can manage."

"Then you must consider the contents. The instruments don't weigh much, and they're wrapped in bubble wrap, so the whole thing is almost as light as air. Whatever you put inside must not arouse suspicion."

"Crumpled-up newspaper," Sadie said.

"What did she say?"

I repeated it for his benefit.

Sadie said, "Briony has a stack of *Daily Mail*s this high in her room. She hoards everything."

I knew that to be true. Briony kept every postcard, every letter, every magazine. Her room was a treasure house of things other people discarded. She even collected the tiny jars our breakfast marmalade came in. The only question was whether she would donate her newspaper collection to Operation Syringe. She could be fiercely possessive at times.

"I might be able to spare you some of the leaflets that come with my post," she said.

Sadie said, "Junk mail. That'll do."

"It doesn't incriminate me, does it?" she said. "I want no part of this silly escapade."

"Excellent," the Brigadier said, oblivious. "When the parcel is up to inspection standard, I'll tell you about the next phase."

The heat was now on me. I had to smuggle the box back to my room and start work. I was once employed as a graphic designer, so the forging of the forms wasn't a big problem. Getting Briony to part with her junk mail was far more demanding. You'd think it was bank notes. She checked everything and allowed me about one sheet in five. But in the end I had enough to stuff the box. I

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sealed it with packing tape I found in Matron's office and showed it to the Brigadier.

"Capital," he said. "We can proceed to Phase Four: Distracting the enemy."

"How do we do that?"

"We inundate Marcus Haliburton with requests for appointments under bogus names."

"That's fun. I'll tell the others."

Even at this stage, it was still a game, as I tried to explain later to the police. Some of us had mobiles and others used the pay phone by the front door. I think a couple of bold souls used the phone in Matron's office. I don't know if we succeeded in distracting Haliburton. He must have been surprised by the number of Smiths, Browns, Joneses, and Robinsons who had seen his publicity. The greedy beggar didn't turn any away.

And so the day of the heist arrived. Almost everyone from the Never-Say-Die had been talked into joining in and clambered onto the bus the Brigadier had laid on. Half of them were so confused most of the time that you could have talked them into running the London Marathon. The notable exception was Briony. She wanted no part of it. She stayed put, guarding her hoard of newspapers and marmalade jars. The Brigadier called her a ruddy conchie when he found out.

In their defence, few of them knew the finer points of the battle plan. But they still amounted to a formidable squad as they alighted from the bus and listened to the Brigadier's Agincourt-style speech.

"There are senior citizens all over Britain who will think themselves accursed they were not here with us. We few, we happy few, deaf but not downtrodden, stand on the brink of victory. Onward, then."

So began the main assault, as the Brigadier called it. Four old ladies crossed the hotel foyer walker to walker, a vanguard forging a route for the main party, twelve more on sticks and crutches, with two motorised chairs like tanks in the rear. Inexorably they headed for the suite used by Marcus Haliburton for his consultations. Their task: to block all movement in the corridor.

Because of my supposed underworld connections, I had been selected for a kind of SAS role, along with the Brigadier himself. At some time in the first hour, while all the new patients were being documented, tested, and examined, a security firm would deliver the latest box of hearing aids to the hotel. One of the staff was then supposed to bring it to the suite for Haliburton to begin handing out the aids to people who had placed orders on his previous visit. Thanks to the congestion in the corridor, this would not be possible.

The next part was clever, I must admit. The Brigadier had

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booked the room two doors up and he and I were waiting in there with our own box filled with crumpled-up junk mail. The porter was bound to come past with the box containing the expensive digital aids.

We waited three-quarters of an hour and it was a nervous time. I had my doubts whether two elderly gents were capable of intercepting a burly hotel porter, but the Brigadier was confident.

"We're not using brute strength. This is our strength." He tapped his head.

"But if it doesn't work?"

To my horror he took a gun from his pocket and gave a crocodile grin. "My old service revolver."

"That would be armed robbery," I said, aghast. "Don't even think of it."

He misheard me, of course. From another pocket he produced a flask of brandy. "You need to drink a bit? Take a swig, old boy. It stops the shakes, I find."

Before I could get through to him I heard the squeak of a trolley wheel in the corridor outside. The moment of decision. Should I abort the whole operation? Unwisely, disastrously as it turned out, I decided to go on with it. I stepped into the corridor, right in the path of the trolley, and said to the porter pushing it, "Mr. Haliburton said to lock the parcel in here for the time being. He'll collect it when the people waiting have been dealt with."

He said, "I can't do that. I'm under firm instructions to hand it to Mr. Haliburton in person."

I winked and said, "I work with him. It's as good as done." I pressed a five-pound note into his sweaty palm.

Persuaded, he wheeled the parcel into the room and left it just inside the door. The Brigadier meanwhile had stepped out of sight into the bathroom. The porter had the impression he was locking the parcel in an empty room. The idea was that the Brigadier would then emerge from the bathroom with our box of junk mail and make the switch, returning to the bathroom with the box containing the aids, where he would lock himself in for an hour.

My job was to shepherd the Never-Say-Die residents as quickly as possible out of the corridor and back to the bus. I was starting to do so when a man in a grey pinstripe suit came marching up and said, "What's the trouble here? I'm Buckfield, the hotel manager."

"No trouble, Mr. Buckfield," I said. "The system can't cope, that's all. Some of these old people have been waiting an hour for an appointment with the ear specialist. I'm suggesting they come back next time. We've got transport outside."

He looked at me with some uncertainty. "Are you their warden?"

"Something like that."

"One of the bellboys tells me he delivered a box of valuable hear-

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ing aids to Room 104. Was that at your bidding?"

I said, "Yes. I think you'll find it's still there."

He had a passkey and opened the door and picked up the parcel that was waiting there. I gave all my attention to ushering the old ladies towards the foyer and the waiting bus. Most of them were pleased to leave and didn't understand what we had achieved. A few genuine customers for the hearing aids were just as confused, and when we got to the bus I had difficulty persuading two of them that they weren't in the Never-Say-Die party.

Finally everyone except the Brigadier was on board. It was my job to see that all was clear and help him out of Room 104 with the parcel we had requisitioned, the most dangerous part of Operation Syringe.

Trying to look like any other guest, I crossed the foyer and stepped along the corridor. It was now empty of people. I tapped on the door of 104 and immediately realised that there was a fatal flaw in our plan. How would the Brigadier hear my knocking? I tried a second time.

No response.

Along the corridor, the door of Haliburton's suite opened and an old man came out. I tried to ignore him, but he said, "Are you waiting for a consultation? It's that room I just came out of."

I thanked him, but I don't think he heard. I took off a shoe and tried hammering on 104 with it.

At last the door opened and there was the Brigadier with the parcel in his arms. For the first time since I'd known him he looked concerned. "Take this to the bus and tell the driver to put his foot down."

"Aren't you coming?" I said.

"Cunning? Far from it," he said. "I'm a silly arse. Left my service revolver on the bed and some beggar in a pinstripe picked it up."

"Leave it," I shouted into his ear. "Come with me."

"Can't do that," he said and made a little speech straight out of one of those war films when the doomed Brit showed his stiff upper lip. "That revolver is my baby. Been with me all over the world. I'm not surrendering, old boy. I'll get back to base. See if I don't."

I said, "I'm leaving with a heavy heart."

He said, "Don't be so vulgar."

No use trying to talk sense into him. He really had need of a decent hearing aid.

I carried the parcel to the bus. Everyone cheered when they saw it. Then Sadie said, "Where's the Brigadier?"

I didn't want them to know he'd brought a gun with him, so I said he was hiding up until it was safer to leave.

The bus took us back to the home and we tottered off to our rooms for a nap after all the excitement. We'd agreed not to open

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the box before the Brig returned.

All evening we waited, asking each other if anyone had heard anything. I was up until ten-thirty, long past bedtime. In the end I turned in and tried to sleep.

Sometime after midnight there was a noise like a stone being thrown at my window. I got out of bed and looked down. There in the grounds was the Brigadier blowing on his fingers. He shouted up to me, "Be a good fellow and unbolt the front door, will you? I just met a brass monkey on his way to the welder's."

In twenty minutes every inhabitant of the house except the matron and her two night staff assembled in the tea room. The nightwear on display is another story.

"Open it, George," the Brig ordered.

They watched in eager anticipation. Even Briony had turned out. "Ooh, bubble wrap," she said. "May I have that?"

"You might as well, because you're not getting a hearing aid, you conchie," the Brigadier said.

I unwrapped the first aid. It was a BTE (behind the ear), but elegance itself. I offered it to the Brigadier. He slotted it into his ear. "Good Lord!" he said. "I can hear the clock ticking."

Everyone in the room who wanted a replacement aid was given one, and we still had a few over. The morale of the troops couldn't have been higher. Even Briony was happy with her stack of bubble wrap. We all slept well.

At breakfast, the results were amazing. People who hadn't conversed for years were chatting animatedly.

Then the doorbell chimed. The chime of doom. A policeman with a megaphone stood in the doorway and announced, "Police. We're coming in. Put your hands above your heads and stay where you are."

Sadie said, "You don't have to shout, young man. We can all hear you."

We were taken in barred vans to the police station and kept in cells. Because there was a shortage of cells, some of us had to double up and I found myself locked up with the Brigadier.

"This is overkill," I said. "We're harmless old people."

"They don't think so, George," he said in a sombre tone. "Marcus Haliburton was shot dead in the course of the raid."

"Shot? I didn't hear any shots."

"After you left, it got nasty. They'll have me for murder and the rest of you for conspiracy to murder. We can't expect all our troops to hold out under questioning. They'll put up their hands, and we're all done."

He was right. Several old ladies confessed straightaway. What can you expect? The trial that followed was swift and savage. The Brigadier asked to be tried by a court-martial and refused to plead. He went down for life, with a recommendation that he serve

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at least ten years. They proved that the fatal shots had been fired from his gun.

I got three years for conspiracy to murder—in spite of claiming I didn't know about the gun. Sadie was given six months. The Crown Prosecution Service didn't press charges against some of the really frail ones. Oddly, nobody seemed interested in the hearing-aid heist and we were allowed to keep our stolen property.

The Never-Say-Die Retirement Home had to carry on without us. But there was to be one last squirt from Operation Syringe.

One morning three weeks after the trial, Briony decided to sort out her marmalade jars and store them better, using the bubble wrap the aids had been kept in. She was surrounding one of the jars with the stuff when there was a sudden popping sound. One of the little bubbles had burst under pressure. She pressed another and it made a satisfying sound. Highly amused, she started popping every one. She continued at this harmless pastime for over an hour. After tea break she went back and popped some more. It was all enormous fun until she damaged her fingernail and had to ask She-Who-Must-Be-Replaced to trim it.

"How did you do that?" Matron asked.

Briony showed her.

"Well, no wonder. There's something hard inside the bubble. I do believe it's glass. How wicked."

But it didn't turn out to be glass. It was an uncut diamond, and there were others secreted in the bubble wrap. A second police investigation was mounted into Operation Syringe. As a result, Buckfield, the manager of the Bay Tree Hotel, was arrested.

It seemed he had been working a racket with Marcus Haliburton, importing uncut diamonds stolen by workers in a South African diamond mine. The little rocks had been smuggled to Britain in the packing used for the hearing aids. Interpol took over the investigation on two continents.

It turned out that on the day of our heist Buckfield, the manager, suspected something was afoot, and decided Haliburton might be double-crossing him. When he checked Room 104 he found the Brigadier's revolver on the bed and he was certain he was right. He took it straight to the suite. Haliburton denied everything and said he was only a go-between and offered to open the new box of aids in the manager's presence. We know what it contained. Incensed, Buckfield pointed the gun and shot Haliburton dead.

After our release, we had a meeting to decide if we would sue the police for wrongful imprisonment. The Brigadier was all for it, but Sadie said we might be pushing our luck. We had a vote and decided she was right.

The good thing is that every one of us heard each word of the debate. I can recommend these new digital aids to anyone. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE OLD STORY

by Liza Cody

It was a sharp, clear autumn day, and as afternoon turned to evening Harold and I met by appointment outside Kwik Save. No sooner had we met than I had my first shock.

"Move yer wrinkly bum 'oles," a kid yelled at us. And I moved, sharpish, pulling Harold with me. I was amazed at the kid's good manners. Normally they skate right through us without warning, like we're fallen leaves scattering in a high wind.

Harold took a swipe with the wrong end of his cane, trying to hook the board's back wheels.

Three things about Harold: one, he's hotheaded; two, he won't admit he's as deaf as a bathroom door; and I've forgotten number three.

The boy whooshed away unharmed and unaware he hadn't even come close to being upended. He zigged and swerved and zagged and curved along the pavement scaring oldies, youngies, and in-betweenies.

Harold said, "Spotty little turd," and banged his cane on the ground. "He doesn't know how close he came." Harold mimed the murder of a spotty little turd. "I could've done for him. He doesn't

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know who he's messing with."

"Let's keep it that way," I said, taking Harold's arm.

"Huh?" said Harold, and I gave his elbow a pacifying pat. Sometimes I think I'm only included on this enterprise to pacify hot-headed Harold. Because clearly it has been many, many years since I heated anyone's head, and therefore my two old friends, The Gent and Wiggy, gave me the job of keeping him manageable. He boasts that when he was young he ran with one of those famous South London gangs, but neither Wiggy nor The Gent believe him. I'm uncertain. We don't usually work with outsiders.

Liza Cody is not a prolific author, but the several novels she has produced over the past quarter of a century have all been significant books, starting with the first, *Dupe*, which won the John Creasey Award for Best First Novel. Her loyal fans will be glad to know that that first book was brought out in a new paperback edition in 2005 by Felony and Mayhem. The following story is the last of a trio of stories produced for a seminar with fellow authors Michael Z. Lewin and Peter Lovesey. ¶

I kept walking and wondering why the three of us had fallen for Harold's pitch. It isn't as if he's charming and clever like The Gent or clever and funny like Wiggy. And it wasn't as if it were a particularly good plan. In fact, it was downright crude when you consider the slickness of our usual operations.

But when I say usual . . . I have to admit that nowadays we don't plan much and the last operation was Wiggy's—for nasal polyps.

Speaking entirely for myself, I wonder if my reluctance is due to the technicalities of modern banks and building societies. All the intelligent work is done with computers. Modern operators who want to rob a bank only have to flip a switch and rattle around on a keyboard; they don't even have to visit the premises anymore. As Wiggy said, "You can rob without even leaving your own home. All you need is your own five-fingered girlfriend."

"And a little more know-how than we possess," confessed The Gent.

I kept my mouth shut: Technical stuff confuses me and I don't even own a computer. My contributions to our joint enterprises used mainly to be in the planning stage, and as a distraction when the operation went live. I could scream or faint or suffer epi-fits better than any RADA-trained actress.

"Elsie's scream is world-famous," The Gent used to say. But it hasn't been employed for nearly five years and my skill in planning is thwarted by security and surveillance I no longer understand.

Which explains why, on a sharp, clear autumn evening, I was

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calming Harold, and walking as fast as his hip would take us towards Preston's betting shop at the corner of Grosvenor Road and High Street. My hand was firmly in the crook of Harold's elbow. Our reflection in the coffee shop window showed me that we looked frighteningly like an old married couple.

We should be retired and living by the seaside, I thought. But how do you retire from a business like ours? There isn't a company pension. Besides, The Gent is having to remortgage his house because his son's in debt again. As is my daughter, but I try not to think about it. And early this month Wiggy was released from his last vacation at Her Majesty's pleasure to find that his precious Airstream had been repossessed by the finance company. During his absence his sister, who should have been dealing with the payments, took a dippy turn and handed all his money to a donkey sanctuary. So often, in our insecure lives, the three of us have found ourselves starting from scratch. We are all, in our separate ways, dogged by the choices we made when we were young and thought we could always stay ahead of the game.

My recollections were interrupted by someone calling, "Mrs. Ivo. Hey, *Mrs. Ivo!*" I would have walked on, but Wiggy appeared from the Bell pub doorway, and said, "Oh, bloody hell, she's forgotten her own code name. Elsie, you'd forget your family if you didn't carry photos."

"You pronounced it wrong," I said stiffly. "It's Ee-vo. You said Eye-vo."

"Ee-vo, Eye-vo, Nee-vo, Nye-vo, let's call the whole thing off."

"Eh?" said Harold. "No one's calling nothing off."

"It's just one of Wiggy's jokes," I said, patting his arm. "What are you doing here?" I asked Wiggy. "We were supposed not to meet until . . ."

"Come inside," Wiggy said, looking past my shoulder. "Hurry, the CCTV camera's swinging in this direction."

"Huh?" said Harold. Wiggy took one arm, I tugged the other, and we whisked him into the pub before he became visible and bellicose.

"We've run into a problem," Wiggy explained, pointing to the slumped figure of The Gent at a table in a dark corner of the bar-room.

"I'll have a pint since you're offering," Harold said. "One won't hurt."

I hurried over to The Gent.

"It'sh my tooth," he said, covering the lower part of his face with his hand.

"Not his wisdom tooth, obviously," Wiggy said. "He was supposed to go to the dentist last week but he funked it."

"I don't think I can do the job," The Gent said. And indeed, he looked yellowish and extremely unwell.

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"Oil of cloves," I said, rummaging in my handbag.

"Now's not the time for your portable pharmacopoeia," Wiggy said. "He's already rattling, the number of pills he's necked since lunch."

"I don't want to hold you back," moaned The Gent. "I really am sho shorry."

"What's wrong with him?" Harold sat down heavily, slopping his pint.

"Tooth rot."

"Huh?"

"Forget it," Wiggy said. "The only way I can see out of this is if The Gent waits in the car and does the driving instead of Elsie, Elsie is lookout instead of Harold, and Harold comes up to the betting shop with me instead of The Gent."

"Huh? Say again."

"The Gent waits in the car . . ."

"Shut up," I said, "anyone could hear you." Except Harold.

"So what's going *on?"* And that's another thing about Harold—even before his hearing failed he never listened.

"Are you quite sure you want Harold on shtage with you at showtime?" The Gent was speaking through considerable pain.

"Huh?"

"Do we have any alternative? Or should we just abort?"

I would have pressed for standing us all down—it's what any sensible woman would have done. But I didn't want to spend the rest of my life eating lunch at the YMCA cafeteria. I'd rather go back to chokey, I thought. At least there, bad food comes free. Because when times were good, Wiggy, The Gent, and I had often lived high in the sky in foreign cities where hotel suites were more spacious than English houses. Rhubarb and custard at the YMCA isn't the worst thing life can throw at you, but if I thought it was *all* life had to offer from here on in, I think I'd want to top myself.

As it turned out, *I* went on stage with Wiggy, The Gent waited in the car, and Harold kept his job as lookout. It wasn't possible to explain a change of plan to him without a bullhorn. And shouting your plans through a bullhorn when you're making changes to a heist on a betting shop is not advisable.

"Take my coat," The Gent said, "the mashk ish in the left pocket, the plashtic gun ish in the other."

Wordlessly I took the coat and gave him my small bottle of oil of cloves in return. Wordlessly, Wiggy handed over the car keys. "Show time," The Gent said with a brave smile. "Shparkle, guysh. I know you'll be shplendid."

We left him in the car park behind Cristettes Kitchenware and Novelties. The great thing about Cristettes is that the main door opens onto the High Street and you can walk all the way through to the car park at the back. The shop is hugger-mugger with too

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many shelves and stacks and there are no surveillance cameras. It's a great place if you want to get off the street in a hurry.

Preston's is a small betting shop above a newsagent at the corner of Grosvenor Road and High Street. We reached the newsagent five minutes before the betting shop was due to close and left Harold pretending to read the small ads in the early evening paper. He seemed edgy.

Halfway up the narrow flight of stairs Wiggy and I paused to put on our masks and raise the hoods of our coats. It was only then that I realised how much condition Wiggy had lost on his last spell away. For a big man he was always fit and pretty fast, but now he sounded like a hinge that needed a squirt of oil.

"What's up?" I muttered, trying to make the coat of a much taller man zip over a much fuller bosom.

"Just an allergy," Wiggy wheezed back. "These stairs haven't been swept." His mask was an elaborate affair that could have graced a Venetian ball.

"Decongestant?"

"Not now, Elsie," he said patiently. Which was just as well, as I'd left my bag in the car with The Gent.

The Gent's mask was a simple but elegant thing his wife had knitted especially for him from a silk and wool mix. I pulled it over my head and topped it with the hood.

"Let's get this over with," I said. "The hood's ruining my hair."

"Let your coat hang open," Wiggy wheezed. "You still look too much like a woman."

"And you look like a real hunk," I snarled back.

"Let's go. And leave the talking to me."

But after climbing to the top of the stairs he didn't have enough breath to blow out a birthday candle, and the staff behind the grilles didn't even look up as he stood there panting and swinging his baseball bat. So I took over.

"Everybody freeze!" I yelled. Instantly everyone stopped what they were doing. Oh, the power! No one had taken this much notice of me since my daughter was too small to talk back.

"The money!" I shouted. "Give us the money and no one gets hurt."

"The gun," Wiggy hissed, his chest heaving. "It's still. In your. Goddamn pocket." To cover for me he strode to the counter and whacked the baseball bat against the grille. The man and the woman behind the counter cowered in shock. The manager started towards the back.

I fumbled the plastic gun out of my pocket and pointed it at him. "Don't move a muscle," I bellowed. "Instruct your people to fill our bags or I'll put two bullets in your fat gut. Believe me, I can't miss."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Wiggy push a bunch of crum-

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pled plastic bags through the grille. They came from Safeway and I swear they're the same ones we used on our last job. Wiggy never throws anything away.

By now he'd recovered his breath enough to say, "Fill the bags. Quickly. Unless. You want. To see. Your boss. Shot." He sounded eerily like an automaton. The woman started to cry, but she began to stuff bundles of money into the bags.

The manager stood, feebly protecting his paunch with his hands. I kept the gun trained on him while I screamed at the other, younger man. "Help her! Now!" and he suddenly jerked into life and started stuffing bags too.

I was jubilant. Energy surged through every cell of my body. I had no idea what a sense of self-worth there was to be gained from pointing a plastic gun.

"Tie the bags," Wiggy growled, "and throw them. Over. The grille."

Bags sailed over the grille and dropped at our feet.

We'd done it. All we had to do was pick up the bags and leave.

Or not.

The door at the top of the stairs swung open and a man in SecureCorps uniform walked through humming a tune from *Guys and Dolls.*

"Hi there," he said. "Cashed up, everyone? Ready to go?" Then he saw Wiggy. Then he saw me. Then he heard thunderous crashes from the stairs below.

He drew his weapon.

The young man behind the counter started to cry loudly.

Harold charged through the door.

Wiggy swung his baseball bat.

I picked up as many bags of cash as I could manage.

Harold fired his gun. A huge lump of plaster detached itself from the ceiling and fell on the SecureCorps guard's head just as Wiggy's bat connected.

"Oh farkin 'ell," yelled the SecureCorps guard, who was wearing protective headgear but went down in a pile of rubble anyway.

Harold fired his gun at the manager, who seemed to be making for his panic button. The manager went down.

I said, "That wasn't supposed to happen."

"Don't just stand there," Wiggy said, grabbing a couple of carrier bags in the hand that wasn't wielding the bat.

"Huh?" said Harold. And for once I could see what he meant: A real live gun, with real live ammo, going off twice in a confined space leaves you with real live tinnitus. It had never happened to me before. But then I'd never worked with Harold before.

We scrambled for the door. On the stairs Wiggy remembered to remove his mask. He pulled mine off, too. And snatched the plastic gun out of my numb fingers. Harold stumbled down after us, pick-

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ing up his walking stick from where he'd left it at the bottom, and unwinding his scarf from around his head.

I didn't even want to look at him. Wiggy, The Gent, and I had never, in all of our long careers, *ever* used live firearms. No one had ever been hurt except for the odd whomp with a baseball bat when persuasion didn't work. Harold was supposed to be the lookout. He was supposed to have warned us about the SecureCorps guard and not charged in afterwards firing a live gun.

I wanted to drop everything and run away from all of them. A lifetime of YMCA lunches didn't seem so bad anymore. I tore off The Gent's coat and carried it over my arm, hiding some of the Safeway bags. As I'd feared, my hair was a mess.

We stepped out into the bright autumnal street and Wiggy spun round to face Harold. "What. The hell. Did you. Do that for?" he wheezed.

"Say again," Harold said. "Come on, we got to get back to the car. Elsie, give me a hand. My hip's knackered."

"I'd like to knacker your thick skull," I said. I wanted to leave him but I couldn't without endangering the rest of us. "Why the hell didn't you warn us?"

"Huh?" He leaned heavily on my arm and we limped up the High Street towards Cristettes Kitchenware and Novelties.

Wiggy started shouting, *"Why the hell didn't you—"*

"Shut up," I said, "anyone could hear." Except Harold.

Harold didn't even hear the police sirens as three police cars raced past us to the betting shop. My heart was staggering and my vision went speckly. I heard the gunshots and saw the manager tumble all over again.

I'm not quite sure what happened then because the next thing I remember clearly was The Gent helping me out of the car next to my block of flats. He carried a large Cristettes bag which he gave me when we got to my door.

"What's that?" I asked, and The Gent sighed diplomatically.

Apparently I'd had a funny turn in Cristettes and insisted on buying three baking trays, a set of glass candleholders, and a large wok. He reassured me that I'd paid for them with my own money. He said that the staff in Cristettes were very nice to batty old ladies and had thought nothing of it.

"I'll make you a cup of tea," he said sympathetically.

"No, no, I'm quite all right," I said, wondering what on earth I'd do with another wok. This wasn't the first funny turn I'd had in the last year, and for some very odd reason I always seem to buy a wok. But I didn't want to tell The Gent about it. "How's the tooth?" I asked, to distract him.

"Your oil of cloves worked a treat," he said. "I tried it in the car while I was waiting. The tooth's nearly stopped hurting. You're more use than a pharmacist, Elsie." Which, of course, is why we

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call him The Gent—he lies to make other people feel good. But he did look better.

"Wiggy'll be along when he's dropped Harold and dealt with the car." He made sure I was sitting comfortably and then he went away to make the tea.

I sat and wrestled with my wayward mind, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. Why had I felt so wonderful with a plastic gun? So dismal with a live one? Had I drawn attention to us in the shop? What would happen now we were guilty of robbery with violence, maybe even murder? But most of all I wanted to know what went wrong.

I didn't find out until Wiggy showed up when The Gent and I were on our third pot of tea. He turned on the TV for the local news before dropping like a rock onto my sofa. His face was grey with fatigue.

"Harold," he said. "Not my favourite. Person. Big mistake. Working with him."

The Gent poured him a cup of strong tea and we waited while he recovered his breath. "Where's the money?" he asked first.

"Ah yes," The Gent said, "we need to talk about that." He gave me a sidelong glance and then spoke directly to Wiggy. "At the moment it's in Elsie's laundry hamper. I know she usually keeps it in her chest freezer, but when I looked in there I found there wasn't enough room. Elsie, do you know you have four woks in your freezer? Wiggy, she's got four woks in her freezer. I know it's where she hides stuff, but why hide four woks?"

"It's none of your business what I keep in my freezer," I said. "Why aren't we talking about what went wrong at the betting shop?"

"Hold on," Wiggy said, turning up the volume on the TV. "This is about us. Look."

What we saw was black-and-white grainy footage from a surveillance camera somewhere in the ceiling of the betting shop. We watched fascinated as two shadowy figures entered and then one of them skipped around like a goat pointing a gun in all directions.

"That can't be me," I said. "I don't jump around." The Gent and Wiggy said nothing.

Jerkily the two behind the counter began filling bags. The film froze while the newsreader said, "Witnesses describe being threatened by two men wearing masks. The third member of the gang only made his appearance after the arrival of an employee from the security firm who should have transported the day's takings to a night safe."

"Two men?" I said. "That's wonderful. We're home free." Again The Gent and Wiggy stayed silent.

The film continued with the leisurely entrance of the man from

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SecureCorps, shortly followed by the muffled figure of Harold. The newsreader said, "As you can see, the footage ends abruptly when the third man shot out the security camera. The manager of the betting shop, who only survived what he describes as certain death by a trained marksman when he ducked behind the countertop, said, 'These men were armed to the teeth and very violent. They terrorised my staff in what was clearly a meticulously planned raid.' Police are asking anyone who witnessed three men fleeing from the scene to contact them immediately."

"Fleeing?" Wiggy said, turning off the TV. "Harold flees at the speed of a rocking chair. What's up, Elsie?"

"I thought Harold shot the manager," I sobbed. "I thought . . ."

"I know, I know," Wiggy said. "Have you got a handkerchief, Gent? The old broad needs mopping."

The Gent passed me his handkerchief, politely pretending not to see my streaming eyes and nose.

Wiggy said, "Who knew Harold even had a real gun? Maybe he wasn't lying about the South London gang after all."

"It's unforgivable," The Gent said. "We made it quite clear to Harold—no real firearms. He knows how we work. We have a reputation."

"He wasn't supposed to be there," I said, blowing my nose on The Gent's immaculate linen. "He was supposed to be the lookout, but where was he?"

"Ah yes," Wiggy said. "Don't think I didn't ask about that. Very loudly. Guess what?"

"What?"

"He had a beer in the pub, remember? So he's standing outside the newsagent waiting and watching and, stripe me pink, his bladder starts playing up. So the silly old bugger goes to take a leak. On his way back, he sees the SecureCorps guy disappearing upstairs and all he can think of to do is follow him up and shoot him."

"He was aiming at the *man?*" The Gent asked, horrified.

"That's what he said."

"I'm too old for this," I sniffled.

"I have to take the blame," The Gent said. "If I hadn't been too much of a wimp to go to the dentist we wouldn't have gone to the pub. If Harold hadn't drunk a pint of bitter his weak bladder wouldn't have been a determining feature of this fiasco."

"Don't let's talk blame," Wiggy said firmly. "Because I might have to admit I'm not fit enough for this kind of life anymore. If I hadn't been out of breath Elsie wouldn't have had to take charge—which she's obviously unsuited to do. I feel directly responsible for her whatchamacallit."

"What?"

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"Don't get arsey with me, Elsie. You had a . . . er . . . an emotional episode in Cristettes."

"Just a momentary confusion," The Gent put in tactfully. "You were splendid in the betting shop."

"Thanks," I said. "But Wiggy's right. I have been having, well, memory lapses. I'm taking St. John's Wort and fish oils and something else I can't remember. But I should have told you."

"Told us what?" Wiggy asked. "That you're a mad old bat? Gee, what a surprise."

"Maybe all three of us should think again about the active approach," The Gent said. "Maybe the way to go is technological."

"I haven't got a computer," I said. "It's too late for me to learn, and anyway I can't afford it."

"Yes, you can," The Gent said. "Besides what we took from the betting shop you've got . . ." He turned to Wiggy. "In her freezer she's got dozens of oddly shaped packages labelled 'Leg of lamb' and 'Ham hock,' which, believe me, are not legs of lamb or hocks of ham or even sides of beef."

"You're mistaken," I said. "I'm a vegetarian. I don't buy ham hocks."

"We know," The Gent said. "You've got a freezer full of cash under all those woks. You're like a squirrel who's forgotten where she hid her nuts."

"She's certainly nuts," Wiggy said. "But she might be right, Gent: We might just be home free. No one saw us."

"Of course they saw us." I waved at the TV. "They called me a man."

"Exactly," said The Gent. "They called two doddery old men and one dotty old lady 'three very violent men.' Longevity makes us invisible and prejudice renders us incapable."

"Apart from ripping off a betting shop," Wiggy said, "our second most serious crime was to get old."

"But it saved our asses," I said.

"Maybe," The Gent said, "but not for long."

"Don't worry." Wiggy consoled me. "He doesn't mean the cops. He means the Grim Reaper."

"Oh, that's all right then," I said. ●

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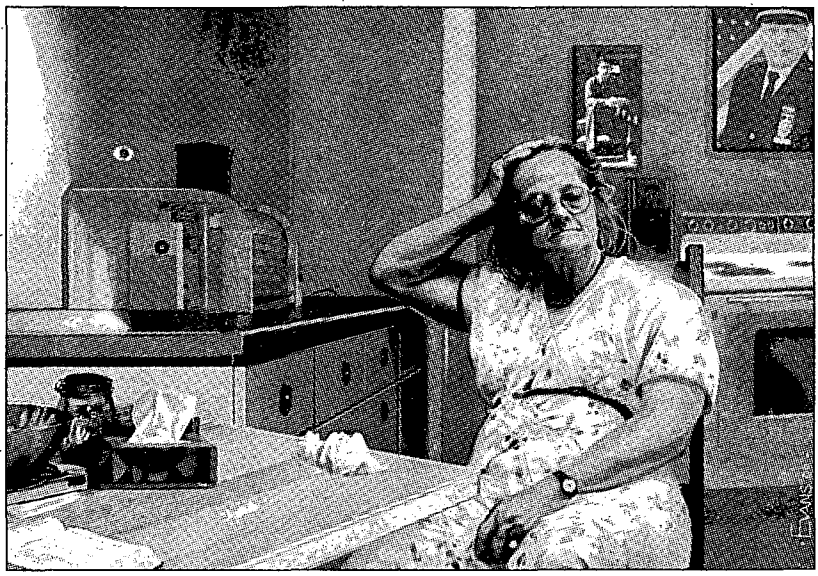

Art by Mark Evans

ONE GOOD ONE

by Chuck Hogan

Milky got home about nine that night, sweating and shivering like he had the flu. Which he did. He had the street flu; he was in a bad way. He opened the door to the house on O Street *(Best thing about living on O Street? You only have to walk a block to P.)* trudged up the stairs to the third-floor apartment, and watched his shaky hand try to fit the key inside the lock.

Ma was at the table. In her housecoat. Her close-set eyes were red-rimmed from crying, and Milky knew instantly.

"Why, Eddie?" she said. Grief tuned her voice up a notch. "Why?"

Edward Francis Milk felt his gut drop, like a sack of garbage hitting the floor.

He said, "What, Ma?"

"You *know.*" Her hands, worn like old dish towels, gripped her crossed arms tightly in hopeless self-consolation. "I know it when I see it."

"Ma."

"Eddie, you promised me. You always promised. My little boy . . ."

The guilt. Milky was thirty-one years old, still living with his mother. Then the anger. *Milky was thirty-one years old, still living*

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with his mother. "What were you doing in my room, Ma?"

"You been away two days. No phone call, no nothing. I'm scared, I'm all alone. What'm I supposed to do? Sit here and wait?"

"Not go through my *things.*"

"I was going to call the police. Report you missing. You should thank the man above I didn't."

"I was . . . I was working."

"You used to want to be a cop." She wept for him now. "You'd put on Dad's shirt and hat and pretend you was him . . . "

This memory had lost all traction with him, the number of times she retold it. "Ma."

"Jimmy's passing *killed* him. Not the grief of it. The *shame.* Having it in our house? In *his* house? He told me, your father did, he said, 'Eddie ever does it, Eddie ever follow in Jimmy's footsteps, out of my house he goes. Put him right the hell out.' You know I got to honor that, Eddie." She looked at Eddie's father's picture, framed and standing on top of the stove. Him in his transit-cop uniform. A smaller photo of Jimmy laughing on the front steps was next to it. "This is still his house."

"Ma."

"Now I got to put you out." She pushed herself up from the chair, and in her housecoat nearly flew to the sink. She clung to it as though hands from the floor had her by the ankles, pulling her down. "My baby boy. I should of dragged you to church with me. Should of *dragged* you. You're leaving me all alone in the world!"

"Ma." He just couldn't do this now. "Ma, sit down."

"Where you been all this time, Eddie? Where?"

"*Working,* Ma." He hit his chest where the letters MBTA, for Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, were stitched over the pocket. Milky had been fired five months before, but still left the house most mornings dressed for work. For her sake.

"Two days straight, and no call?"

"Work is work, Ma."

"How could you bring this evil down upon me? You're all I got, Eddie! Daddy's in heaven and Jimmy's in the ground and you . . . you . . . "

She felt her way back into the chair, a handkerchief clutched in her hand over her heart. She looked gray. She wasn't breathing right.

"Ma. Ma, listen to me. Where is it? Tell me what you did."

Chuck Hogan sold his first crime thriller at age 26, while working in a video store. His 2004 novel, *Prince of Thieves* (Scribner), won the Hammett Prize, and a film version is now in production at Warner Brothers. He says he was inspired to try his hand at short fiction when he met one of the great current masters of the form, Ed Hoch. This is Mr. Hogan's second short story. His latest novel, *The Killing Moon,* is just out from Scribner. ✝

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"How you could bring it in this house after your only brother . . ."

"Ma, where'd you put it?"

"I didn't touch it!" Her arm fell dead on the table. "I don't touch that stuff. *I* know better."

"Ma." Milky grabbed a seat, pulled it near. Her voice was like raccoon claws scraping at the insides of his eyes. He ran his hand through his hair and it came back wet with scalp sweat. He wasn't moving out. He wasn't going nowhere except down the hallway to his room to cook a foil and do up. "Listen to me, Ma."

"Both my boys, these drugs . . ."

"Ma, *shut up!*"

He wasn't yelling at her. He was yelling at himself.

"Look," he said. "This is something I'm not supposed to tell. Not to anyone. Not even my own mother. No one, you understand?"

He got right up again and paced in the kitchen. His angst was real. This was a leap off a cliff. A Hail Mary pass. The kind of lie that had no end, but he knew he had to follow through anyway, and hope for some miracle. He was too dopesick to argue with her. He was sweating like an egg left out on the counter.

"Ma, it's this way, okay? I'm a cop. Not really a cop—not a full cop. Not yet. But I'm on that track. I'm working for them now, you see? Undercover. And this—this breaks every rule in the book, me telling you here. If only you hadn't gone into my room . . ."

He spun around, gripped a handful of his own hair. He wished he could rip it out. Focus the pain on his flesh, instead of underneath where it wriggled through him like bloodsucking worms.

"But Eddie, how could—"

"I worked it out with them. They know Dad, of course—they remember him, they all still talk about him. And they approached me about maybe doing this . . . and I tell them, I says, 'I got some priors, some trouble in my youth, maybe a little even beyond juvie.' And they says, 'That little stuff we can work out. If you can show and demonstrate who you are now. Make up for those mistakes, balance the books. If so, then clean slate.'"

She said, "They talked about Dad?"

"I told them up-front, I says, 'I don't want to coast. Don't bring me in on the old man's reputation alone.' Because who could live up to that anyway? But they says, 'Milky'—or, actually, it's 'Eddie' they call me. 'Eddie, you got to be your own man. We know that. There's room for you with us if you work hard now. But it's dangerous, this thing. This is lion training without no whip. You'll be in that ring all alone.'"

He could see emotion tugging at her face. Like waves washing seaweed forward and backward. She wanted to believe him. To commit to this. To crash onto the sandy beach of good news.

He felt the crinkle of the Summons to Appear still in his back pocket, from just having been cut loose of the Suffolk County Jail.

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"Here," he said, taking out the pink form, folding it so that she could see only the official seal and the lettering above his typed name. "See that? City of Boston, right there. Boston Police Department." He put it away again before she could reach for it. "I'm breaking rules left and right here, Ma. I'm jeopardizing my place with them as it is, just telling you this. Risking everything. So you gotta trust me now. Please. And for Christ's sake, stay outta my stuff from here on in."

"Eddie . . . I just don't know. I remember Jimmy, all his lies."

"That's just it, Ma. It's because of Jimmy that I went to them. That's what this thing is. Bringing those others to justice."

"Who?"

"I can't say. I can't tell you nothing more, Ma, we won't discuss these things. In fact, we should never talk about any of this again. Ever. Let it be an understanding."

"The department, Eddie? For real?"

"I'm trying not to count my chickens too hard. Things haven't panned out for me before. But they been good to me so far, and I'm trying to be good to them. Only now I got the added stress of worrying about you knowing."

"No, Eddie."

"This is a long-term project I'm on, understand. Nothing's going to break overnight. They tell me these things take months, maybe years. But I'll do what they say, however long it takes. This is my shot here, and I know it."

These last words he felt in his chest. Felt them like they were the truth.

Ma was sitting back now, breathing easier. The strange look in her unfocused eyes, faraway yet so close: It was pride. It was love.

"Come here," she said.

He did. He went and leaned down, and she placed her warm and trembling palms on his clammy cheeks. Her pale lips quivered as she stared at him, drinking him in like medicine. This clinch was as close as they ever got. The Milk family version of a hug and a kiss.

"My boy," she said.

Milky hated himself then, and loved himself at the same time. A terrible sort of dreadful euphoria, as though he had shot his own mother up with smack. Tied her off and injected her himself and watched her eyes go liquid, and let her thank him for it, for delivering her from suffering. Delivering her from pain. Turned out both of them had needed to get high.

"You're not going to tell no one," he said.

"No, no."

"Not until I let you know the time is right."

"Then I shout it from the back porch. I dance up Broadway in heeled shoes."

He had her soaring. Pipe dreams worked for everybody. He stood straight again, his mother sitting back.

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"I thought I'd lost you, Eddie. Thought my best boy was gone from me forever."

Milky squeezed her hand and stole a glance down the narrow hallway toward his room, needing to do up so badly right now.

The walk was an informal thing that, over time, had become consecrated. All the old war widows (staying married in Southie, that was a war) met at the rink down on the Point and walked Day Boulevard to Castle Island, around and around the old fort there at the edge of the harbor. Two shifts, a late-morning walk and a late-afternoon walk. A gang of gray ladies in white Reeboks and duck-brimmed visors, walking laps around the belly-ringed teenagers promenading their baby buggies.

That morning, there were only two of them. There was Rita and, wasn't it just her luck, Patty Milk. Patty had stopped walking for a long time after her youngest boy Jimmy died up on their roof. Now she tagged along every once in a while, rarely with anything to say. Always a step or two behind the pack, just walking and looking out to sea.

The story was that Patty's father had nodded off drunk one afternoon at Cushing Beach. Somebody else found Patty, who was only two or three at the time, facedown and floating in the surf. They pulled her out and got her to Mass. General, but she was never right after that. Growing up, she had that look, the chubby face, eyes a little off-kilter, her mouth thin-lipped and cornered down. The father insisted she was fine and was content to let the neighborhood raise her. No special schools. After puberty, she developed an infatuation with men of the cloth. Stalked them over at St. Brigid's like a girl after a boy band. Many nights, the cops had to come pick her up for tapping on the rectory windows. It was scandalous. She should have been sent away.

Over time, her obsession switched to cops. The uniforms, Rita figured. And Jimmy Milk, he took what was offered him. For that, he was made to marry her, a shotgun wedding with the neighborhood and not the father holding the gun. But Jimmy Milk never regretted it. She waited on that man hand and foot, worshiped him as if he walked on water and cured the sick. Her boys, too, Eddie and Jimmy, Jr. Three men spoiled by a damaged woman, raised in a rent-controlled O Street walk-up on the salary of a transit cop too timid to grift.

Patty would often ask Rita about Rita's son Billy. Going on about how proud she must be, her eldest son a builder, living up in Swampscott. And Rita always told her, not rubbing it in but trying to give the poor woman some hope: *All you need is one good one.*

"Ain't that the truth," answered Patty this day.

That was strange. Patty had a little extra spring in her step, Rita noticed. She wasn't trailing behind like the runt of the litter. And

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didn't Rita hear that Eddie Milk lost his T job some months back?

"You have news?" said Rita, these being the most words the two women had exchanged in the last five years.

Patty gazed out at the sea, the gulls coasting with their dirty wings spread wide in the salt air, and Rita realized that Patty Milk was positively bursting.

Derrick sliced up the whiskey bread his mother had baked. Irish soda bread with raisins soaked overnight in Hennessy's. When the mood struck, she would bake up a few loaves for neighbors and friends, whoever was on her good list that month, and always one to take by Marian Manor, where she worked. The bread was soft enough and safe enough for the elderly patients to gum, and the raisins put them right to sleep.

Derrick paused a moment, realizing that the knife in his hand, the one with the splintered handle, was the same knife he had used to slice up Sulky Nealon. But that was a month or so ago, and besides, the blade had been washed and dried.

His mother baked bread today because Billy was home. Derrick's brother, the golden boy who married a fat girl from the North Shore and moved out of Southie. Today he had returned for a rare Sunday dinner.

"Slice that thicker, Derr," said Rita, Derrick's mother. And for some reason, he did. He had a lot of patience today. Because there was something good on his horizon. Something big.

"You get down to the Island today, Ma?" he asked from the kitchen.

"I got my walk in, yeah," she said, from the parlor. To Kelly, Billy's pregnant wife, seated next to her on the divan all polite and shit, she said, "Good for my lungs."

"Still rollin' with the gray ladies?" said Billy, an inch taller in new, heeled shoes.

"I'm to be the fifth grandma in the bunch," said Ma. "Today out there, it was just two of us. Me and Patty Milk."

"Milky's ma, huh?" said Billy, some of that North Shore condescension crawling into his voice. "Good old Milky. What's that mope up to these days?"

"That's the thing," said Ma. "Derrick, you hear anything about Eddie joining the force?"

Derrick almost laughed out loud. "Eddie what?"

She went on, to Billy, "I was telling Patty about you putting up the new development in Wilmington. She said her Eddie had some good news coming. That he was working for the police on something, a special project. I figured MBTA, but she seemed to say no. Derr, didn't you tell me he got clipped from the T?"

Derrick had stopped slicing. He was staring down at the sliced bread, the whiskey-soaked raisins swollen, yellowed. He set the knife down on the carving board.

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Derrick stood with Milky outside Hub Video. Milky was scratching lottery tickets with his thumbnail and dropping the losers to the sidewalk, one after another.

"Still playing, huh?" said Derrick.

"You kidding me?"

"I quit that." Derrick shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "I'm quitting a lotta things. Thinking about it."

"Yeah? What's up?"

"Don't know exactly. Change in the air around here, I guess."

Milky dropped his last scratch ticket. He looked concerned. "Well, maybe that's a good thing."

"I think it is. Like, you getting pinched again a couple of days ago. Not good. How'd that thing go?"

"The usual. Except they forgot about me in there and I was in longer than I should've. I pay this fine, I avoid the thirty days. Which I have to do. My ma."

"Yeah," said Derrick.

"I was going to see, maybe, if you could front me some. Against this thing at the end of the month."

Derrick said, "You want some up-front?"

"Fine's twelve-fifty."

Derrick's eyebrows climbed. "That's steep."

"I need the dough to stay out here. Think you can do?"

Derrick put one sneaker tread flat against the brick wall behind him and crossed his freckled arms. "Pushy. This ain't like you, Milky."

"I'm walking a tightrope here, you know?"

"How's your ma doing, anyways?"

"Her? She's good. She's all right. She's got her TV. Her chair."

"Been walking with mine out on the Island."

"Yeah? I didn't know that. Good. Keep her from turning to stone."

Derrick watched Milky step foot to foot on the sidewalk in the cooling night air. Milky was straight now, but the dancing-in-place told Derrick he didn't intend to be for much longer.

"So, can you front me? Or any chance of moving this thing up?"

Derrick said, "Now you want me to move it up."

"If I go away for thirty, how can I help you with this thing?"

Derrick looked out at Broadway, the parked cars lining both sides of the broad avenue. A white van turned past them onto Emerson, and Derrick stared it down. Then he figured that wasn't very smart. He had to play this cool.

"I'm pushing that thing back," he said. "Maybe indefinitely, I don't know. I'm starting to think there's a better way out here, you know? Things are changing. Don't look it, but they are."

"A better way?" said Milky.

"Twelve-fifty, huh?"

"In five days' time."

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Derrick nodded. "But your ma there, she's good?"
"She's good, Derr, yeah. She's good."
"Good," said Derrick. "That's good."

Yarrow stopped with the darts pulled out of the board. He turned. "What?" he said.

Derrick said, "I'm telling you."

"This is based on what?"

"And I been going dizzy here trying to think back, all the things I told him. Trying to think, has he ever been inside this house without me around? You know—listening devices and such."

Yarrow returned to him from the wall, Derrick pulling another Killian's Red from the old Coleman cooler. Yarrow toed the chalk line on the basement floor and readied a dart. "You're getting paranoid."

"Think back on him. Think hard."

Yarrow threw a nineteen. "You been smoking too much."

"It explains things. Little things going wrong recently. Something's in the air, abuzz. He's all into me for this coming-up thing."

"What does he know?"

"He knows. Not every particular. I don't spread much around, that's not my style. But he gets it. He come to you for money?"

"He did, yeah."

"See? Wanted an advance against the take. First of all, I ain't loaning money to nobody. I ever float a loan you know of?"

"Negative."

"Ain't gonna happen. So why's he so pushy all of a sudden? Asking to move up the timetable? Getting into us for cash? That's us showing intent."

"He said it was Get Outta Jail money."

"Maybe it's not money he needs to get out." Derrick's finger went back and forth between them. "Maybe it's us."

Yarrow scowled. "I think he's probably fine."

"'Probably fine.' You're not careful."

"How am I not careful?"

"You're too trusting."

"Who do I trust?"

"Too many."

"'Too many.' Who do you trust?"

"I don't trust nobody. Except who I trust."

"You trust me?"

"I don't trust Milky."

"You never liked that kid."

"I liked his brother. Liked his brother a lot. His brother was the shit. Wish he had been *my* brother. You didn't know Jimmy."

"Not well."

"Before you came back to town. The shit, he was. Until Oxy turned his head into a friggin' butterfly cage. Never saw anyone in

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such a hurry to die."

Yarrow launched his last two darts in quick succession, having lost his taste for the game. Fourteen and a triple-ring eight. "Milky, though. What's he gonna do? He dimes us, how's he gonna show his face around town again?"

"Witness relocation or some such. They're forcing him into it, don't you see? They pushed a deal across the table, and he took it because he's a weak sister. Because he's strung out like Silly Putty, and because of his ma. That's why they picked him up on the possession charge. The fix was in on this from the start."

"What fix?"

"Don't you see? Busting him, breaking him down, using him to get to you and me."

"Who told you this?"

"About him? I know."

"Who told you exactly? I think I need to know."

"This came from very close, and it was pure happenstance how I got it. I was lucky. I still got a guardian angel left somewhere."

Yarrow collected the darts. "She's your last one, that's for sure."

Derrick swigged his Killian's and said, "I want to go over there right now and beat the shit out of him. Beat the *truth.*"

"That would not be wise."

"This throws everything into question. How can we make a move, period? If everything we say . . ." He waited for Yarrow to return, then lowered his voice. "If everything we say and do is being taken down. The friggin' Invisible Man could be in this room with us."

"Then we said too much already. We got to know for sure. So how do we do that? Search him for a wire?"

"Forget that. They sew those things into the clothes now, they're so small. Nothing would be taped to his chest. They hide that shit anywhere."

"Even if you freeze him out, then what? He already knows what he knows. If you seriously have a question, you need to keep him close."

"Friggin' right. Like *The Godfather.*"

"The thing is what, eleven days off? That's some time."

"Don't upset the cart. That's what you're saying."

"Eyes on the prize, baby."

"All right." Derrick took the darts from Yarrow, readied one. "But if Milky turns out dirty, I swear to God, I'm gonna smoke him."

It would have been cooler if he'd thrown a bull's-eye then, instead of a lousy six.

Pendleton and Kyter stopped by O Street before lunch, double-parking outside. Two winding flights up the narrow staircase, Mrs. Milk answered the door holding her housecoat robe together with one wrinkled hand.

Pendleton badged her. "We need to see Eddie."

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Mrs. Milk smiled at the sight of them, shuffling backward to welcome them inside. "I don't know where he is right now. Out working hard, I'm sure. You can leave a message for him with me. He'll want to get right in touch with you as soon as he can."

Pendleton smelled buttermilk, looking up and down the narrow hall. "Sure he will."

Mrs. Milk's eager smile was not the welcome they got from most mothers whose grown sons were in trouble with the police. "Can I get you two something to drink?"

Kyter said, "I don't think so, Mrs. Milk."

"Eddie is working very hard," she said, stepping closer, speaking confidentially. "He wants to do well. To prove to you that he can."

"Prove he can what?" said Pendleton, hiking up his pants. "Stay out of jail?"

"See," she said, ignoring the comment, "I know he wasn't supposed to tell me, but . . ."

They waited. "Tell you what, Mrs. Milk?"

"Well, that he's working for you."

Kyter looked at Pendleton. "Working for us?"

"Working *with* you. But please, don't fault him. You know a mother has ways of finding things out. His secret's safe with me." She looked at a framed photograph hanging on the wall, a man with two young boys fishing off a pier. "He's going to look so handsome in uniform."

The detectives looked at each other.

"Okay, Mrs. Milk," said Kyter. "Tell Eddie we came by. Tell him to do himself a favor and get in touch."

"He will." She touched the glass front of the frame as she spoke. "He has a lot to live up to now."

The detectives were pissed off going downstairs, as though they had been the ones lied to.

"That little shit," said Pendleton, out at their car. "That weasel."

Kyter said, "I'm sick of this shit. Sick of getting the thumb from him. We come by here like a taxi service?"

"He's working for us, huh? Working *with* us?"

"Imagine that day."

Pendleton looked at him over the roof of the car. "I think now it's time we teached him a lesson."

The traffic stop went down in Andrew Square. They brought a marked cruiser with them, full rack lights, big show. Everybody out, hands on the roof.

Pendleton patted down Derrick Shanahan. "You don't got any warrants there, Shanahan, do you?"

Kyter took Chippie Yarrow, kicking out one leg and bouncing him against the once-white Mazda. "How 'bout you, Yarrow? Any outstandings?"

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Derrick said, "What is this?"

"Inspection sticker," said Pendleton, tapping the corner of the windshield of the beat-up Mazda. "Twenty-nine bucks would have done it. Gotta keep up."

Kyter said, "Downtown we'll tell you all about how it works."

Eddie Milk stood with his hands on the car roof, very quiet, very nervous.

"You," said Pendleton. "Milky."

Milky said nothing, eyes staying down.

Pendleton said, "Go ahead, take off. Get outta here."

Milky blinked like there had been a mistake, relief coming into his eyes. Amazed at his good fortune, he started away before they could change their minds, glancing back over his shoulder as he walked fast into the crowd.

Derrick stared at the roof of the Mazda as if he was trying to remove the paint finish using only the heat from his eyes.

Yarrow looked at the detective facing him as handcuffs clasped around his wrists.

Yarrow went alone to Milky's place. He wanted to get to him before Derrick did.

Milky's mother answered the door, said she didn't know where he was.

"Look, Mrs. Milk. Did two plain-clothes detectives come by here a couple of days ago?"

She clammed up then. She looked worried.

Yarrow said, "How long has Milky been gone?"

Kyter was standing at his desk, waiting for Pendleton when he came in. "He called, all pissy."

Pendleton spilled down his mobile and his keys. "I expected that."

"Says he's gonna call us on it. Gonna write it up."

"Bullshit. So we got a little creative. Who knew?"

"He wants a favor. Demands it."

"What the hell now?"

"Not for him. For the mother, he says."

"For her?" said Pendleton. "What's that get us?"

"Gets us nothing. But he's holding our feet to the flames here."

"To do what?"

"Just show up. Make an appearance."

"Walk in there?"

"Make like it's out of respect. The woman's all alone now. Widow, one son ODed. He says she needs something good to cling to."

"What are we now, Santa Claus?"

"It's a gesture. For my own conscience, too."

"Christ."

"Don't hard-ass me. You know we dicked this up. We wanted to

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put Eddie Milk in his place. Put him on the outs with his little crew there. Well, it big-time backfired. If this is how we pay, if this is the sum total? Then we get off cheap."

Pendleton said, "He was a weasel. Who got thrown under an Amtrak."

"Fine," said Kyter. "Put on your tie."

In the back room of O'Connor's, the black-awninged funeral home on Broadway, men sat on padded folding chairs sipping whiskey and paying their respects. In the main parlor, Mrs. Milk sat in a brocaded chair wearing a black crepe dress and white Reeboks. The closed casket was peacocked with a ragged assortment of flowers, the largest wearing a white sash reading "SON."

The conductor had seen an obstruction on the tracks. He hit the brakes and the body was dragged two hundred feet, sparks igniting its clothes. Between those burns and the wheel cuts, the coroner was at a loss. Milky's death was ruled a suicide, like his father.

Pendleton and Kyter walked in close to eight. They stood in the receiving line, staring down a couple of punks while waiting their turn. Mrs. Milk recognized the two detectives and rose to her feet. They took her aside and spoke with her quietly. Kyter even held her hand.

In the back room, Derrick grabbed Yarrow's jacket lapel. "You see that shit? Right there."

Yarrow watched Kyter patting Mrs. Milk's shoulder as she convulsed into a black hankie.

Derrick said, "I knew I was right to top him."

Yarrow froze, the Dixie cup of whiskey in his hand. "What'd you say?"

Derrick stared hard. He wore a grin on his face like a look of sick determination, his breath smelling flammable. "End of the month is officially back on."

Later, after the mourners had thinned out, Yarrow went up to the bier, kneeling before the walnut veneer of the no-frills casket. Mrs. Milk sat alone in her chair, humming a church hymn to soothe herself. She had her hero now, a martyr to look down over her from the wall in that third-floor walk-up on O Street. She would be consoled. Those two bumblers had done something right for a change.

I knew I was right to top him.

Admission of murder. It didn't matter now whether or not the end-of-the-month deal went down.

Yarrow made like he was crossing himself, feeling the sweat-dampened front pleat of his shirt, the thin wire that was sewn in there. Under his breath he muttered something—a prayer for Milky, and for all the wayward sons of the town—that only the passive electronic ear could hear. "Never lie to your mother." Then he stood, touched his fingertips to the coffin's cool finish, and walked away. ●

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The Girl Next-Door

by Edward D. Hoch

In an era when small private detective agencies had all but disappeared from most medium-sized cities, our firm of Darlan & Trapper continued to show a profit, mainly because of Mike Trapper's connections with some of the national tabloids. Mike had bought into a partnership with me some years back, rejecting his family's plans that he attend law school. He was a good detective but young enough to be my son and I couldn't help taking a fatherly interest in him.

Although Edward D. Hoch is a winner of the lifetime achievement award of the Private Eye Writers of America, few are the Hoch stories that fit the P.I. category. This new story is one of those few: an entry in his Al Darlan series. Darlan's case this time involves the dark side of celebrity in the music business. Coming next month, an Alexander Swift historical. ¶

He and Marla had been married several years, and had a couple of children. She was a lovely young woman but she was also the occasional source of friction between Mike and me. It was her prodding that persuaded him to start collecting dirt on visiting rock stars when they came to town, and sell it to the tabloids. To me it was no better than the grimy divorce work I'd abandoned early in my career.

"Why do you keep doing it, Mike?" I asked him one damp spring day when business was slow.

"It pays the rent, doesn't it?"

I sighed and said, "Marla is pretty high-maintenance, isn't she?" Almost at once I regretted I'd said it.

"Look, Al, you've got your life and I've got mine. You're on your own. I have a family to support. I know you and Marla have never hit it off."

"She's a fine woman. I'm sorry I said that."

Perhaps it was best that our conversation was interrupted at this point by the arrival of our neighbor, Stacy Cline. Stacy was just out of college, and attractive in a girl-next-door sort of way. Come to think of it, she was the girl next-door. She worked at Santillo's, the small insurance office adjoining ours, which hadn't done much business in the six months they'd been there. Stacy often came over to see us when things got too dull. "Hi, guys," she

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greeted us. "How's the private-eye business these days?"

"Slow as the insurance business these days," Mike told her. "Want some coffee?"

"Sure." I was never much of a coffee drinker but Mike was.

"I haven't seen your boss around lately," he said. "You running the place by yourself?"

She shrugged, accepting the coffee from him. "So long as he's there on Fridays with my check, he can stay away as long as he wants."

We'd seen Rich Santillo only two or three times, once when he came to the office after eight one night while I was working. He was a rough-looking man of around forty, with a brush cut that made him look like an ageing wrestler. I guessed that Stacy was just as happy she didn't have to share the office with him every day.

"How does he do enough business to keep that place open?" I asked. "We never see any customers."

"He has a few regulars. Sometimes he comes in nights to work."

"I saw him one night."

She sat in her favorite client's chair. "You guys need a secretary."

"We bring one in part time when we need to," he told her. "You applying for a job?"

Stacy shook her head. "I've got one that pays a lot better than you guys could manage." She glanced through the open door and put down her coffee. "Looks like I might have a customer. See you later."

The teenage rock star Lily Lake was in town for three nights of concerts, trailed by rumors that Sly Morgan was on the scene too. It was the sort of rumor that set the tabloids hopping and brought in some extra cash for Mike Trapper. He left the office in midafternoon, planning to scout the hotels where Sly might be registered under an assumed name. Morgan was a B-list actor who'd hooked up with Lily to further his own career. He had that brooding look teenagers seemed to love, complete with blond hair and tattoos, and the tabloids couldn't get enough of him and Lily, especially on those rare occasions when the paparazzi managed to catch them together.

I hadn't planned on working late that night, but I'd just wound up a security job for a local college and I wanted to finish putting my report on the computer. It was just after eight o'clock when I heard the door to Santillo's insurance office opening. He was back for another late-night visit. I paid little attention, tapping away at my keyboard. I might have heard voices but I couldn't even be sure of that. Then suddenly there were two loud cracks, close together. I'd heard enough gunshots in my life to know what they were.

I kept my own rarely-used gun in the safe, and it took me a vital moment to retrieve it. By the time I reached the hallway there was only the echo of the stairwell door closing. The door to Santillo's office was standing open and I saw him on the floor, bleeding. He may have seen me, and he lifted one arm in a futile

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gesture. Then the life went out of him. Both bullets had caught him in the chest. I stepped to the phone and dialed 911.

The uniformed cops arrived first, followed by Sergeant Ramous, a homicide detective I'd known for years. "What happened here?" he asked me.

I told him what little I knew. "You might want to check the stairwell door for prints. I think the killer left that way."

"You got a weapon, Al?"

"It's back on my desk. I grabbed it when I heard the shots."

He walked back with me while his men set to work on the crime scene. He picked up the .38 revolver and sniffed the barrel, then opened the cylinder and spun it to see that it was fully loaded. "I didn't think anyone still carried these things. You should get yourself a Glock or one of the other nine-millimeter automatics."

"I'd hate to tell you the last time I fired a gun. Mike has a nine-millimeter and I borrow it once in a while, but this'll do me nicely. I'm getting too old for gunplay."

"You came close tonight."

"Yeah."

"Tell me about the victim."

"Not much to tell. Name's Rich Santillo. He rented the office about six months ago but he wasn't around much. Came in at night sometimes, like tonight. He has one employee, a young woman named Stacy Cline, who's there during office hours."

"Know her address?"

"No idea. It might be in the desk somewhere, in an address book."

"Did you hear any voices, sounds of an argument?"

"I heard him open the door, but that was all. There may have been voices. I wasn't paying attention until I heard the shots."

"You didn't chase after the killer?"

"It seemed more important to tend to Santillo. He died within seconds, but by then it was too late to go after anyone. Our building doesn't have any lobby security."

"And he said nothing?"

"Not a word."

I tried reaching Mike at home but Marla said he'd gone to the Lily Lake concert. By the time he arrived at the office the next morning he knew all about the murder from the TV news. I told him what had happened, what little I knew.

"You might have been killed," he told me.

"The killer probably didn't realize there was anyone else on the floor."

"Has Stacy been in yet?"

I shook my head. "There's no job for her anyway. Didn't you see the crime-scene tape across the door?"

But she did show up, just after ten. "I was down at police head-

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quarters making a statement," she said, settling into her favorite chair. "How about some coffee?"

"So you're out of a job," Mike said, pouring her a cup. "We might be able to use you part-time."

"Mike—" I began.

"We'll talk about it," he said, backtracking a bit. "It wouldn't be much. Leave us your cell-phone number."

"Thanks, I might need the job." She jotted down the number on our notepad.

"How long did you work for Santillo?" I asked.

"Since he opened the office here. Six, seven months? He was always an odd sort of guy, never around much. Sometimes I suspected the office was a front for something, but I couldn't figure out what. I told that to Sergeant Ramous, but he seems to think I know more than I'm telling."

"Whatever happened last night, it's a good thing you weren't here," Mike said. "The killer might have shot you, too."

"Were you here?"

"Just Al. I was over at the Lily Lake concert. It started at eight, just about the time of the killing."

Stacy nodded. "She's great. I'd like to catch tonight's performance if I can get a ticket."

I was a bit old to be a fan of Lily Lake, the latest teen queen who'd come out of nowhere to captivate TV and the music business two years earlier. Mike Trapper was a bit old, for that matter, but his interest was strictly business. Lily Lake was hot stuff in the tabloids, especially now that she'd apparently hooked up with Sly Morgan. "I've got an extra you can have," Mike told her. "I bought them for both nights in case I couldn't get to last night's concert."

"Wow! Thanks, but let me pay you for it."

He handed her the ticket and waved away the offer of money. "It's on me. You need cheering up after what happened."

"My boss was even a Lily Lake fan, can you believe that? He had a whole file drawer full of her clippings and stuff."

"Did she have a policy with him?" I asked.

"No. I asked him once and he said he was just a fan. It wasn't only her. He had clippings on other celebs, too." She took a sip of coffee and remembered something else. "When I first started working for him he took me to dinner once with some guy from one of those tabloid papers."

Mike Trapper perked up at her words. "He did? Do you remember the man's name?"

"Vance something."

"Vance Oberline?"

"That's him."

Mike was trying not to show it, but I could see the news upset him. After Stacy Cline finished her coffee and went on her way, I

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asked what was up. "I don't know, Al, but I intend to find out. Oberline's a stringer for a couple of the big tabloids, and a couple of times lately he turned down items from me because he already had them. Now I find that he's friendly with the guy in the next office. That's too big a coincidence."

"It sure is." I walked over to the wall that separated the two offices. "Let's move this filing cabinet out a few inches."

We found it almost at once. A tiny hole had been drilled through the wall to accommodate a cord and miniature microphone. "He could hear everything we said in this office," Mike said, his anger building.

"You can bet it doesn't stop here. He may have tapped our phone lines and even bugged your computer."

"What for? Just to sell a few items to the tabloids?"

"Maybe, or to find out what you were working on."

"We'd better tell Ramous about this."

I hesitated. "We tell the police and it gives you a motive for killing him."

"What? You think I shot him?"

"Calm down, Mike. I'm just suggesting we wait awhile before telling Sergeant Ramous anything. Meanwhile, you might want to speak with your friend Vance Oberline about all this."

"Yeah. My friend!"

As it happened he didn't have to go searching for Oberline. The man showed up at our office before noon, expressing shock at Rich Santillo's murder. "I didn't realize he had the office next to yours," he said without much conviction. Then, as if noticing my presence for the first time, he asked, "This your partner?"

"I'm Al Darlan," I told him. "I'm the one who tries to keep us honest around here."

He gave me a smirk, which went well with the rest of his dried-up face. "And he's the one who makes the money, right?"

"I'm not making much when you undercut me by buying items from Santillo," Mike told him, his anger brimming over.

"Forget Santillo. That's a dead issue."

"In more ways than one. You know why he rented the office next to ours? So he could eavesdrop on me and steal items for your tabloids."

Oberline's smirk turned into a sneer and I decided I was liking the man less every minute. "He was after bigger game than that. He told me he was on the verge of the story of the century, one that would sell five million extra copies."

"What was that about?"

"I don't know, but he wanted to make sure you didn't get it first."

I remembered Santillo's night visits, when he was probably in there listening to audiotapes and seeing what he could get off our computers. "I have no idea what you're talking about," Mike told

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him, "but if I thought you had anything to do with bugging this office I'd kick your ass through that window! Now get out of here. You and I are finished."

"We're not finished if you have a story to sell. Find out what Santillo was working on and it'll bring big bucks."

"You heard the man," I said. "Get out of this office and don't come back."

He retreated, perhaps deciding at last that we really meant it. When we were alone, Mike said, "We've got to get into that office, Al."

"With crime-scene tape on the door?"

"Stacy must have a key. She was there alone most of the time."

"I don't know if we should involve her," I said, but he was already dialing the number she'd left us. He told her to come by after six, when the other tenants would have closed their offices for the day.

She appeared right on schedule, as chipper as ever. "Hi, guys. What are we going to do tonight?"

"Break into your office. Did you bring the key?"

"Hey, are you serious?"

"I'm afraid he is," I told her. "Let's get it over with."

I sliced carefully through the crime-scene tape so we could stick it back together and with luck avoid discovery. Then Stacy unlocked the office door and we slipped inside. "If anyone's watching, the light will show from outside," she warned.

"We'll have to chance it," Mike decided. "Shining a flashlight around would be even more suspicious."

She directed us to one of the filing cabinets along the wall. Mike was interested in finding the sound-activated tape recorder that was eavesdropping on our office, but I was more interested in the thick files on Lily Lake and several others. "There's lots in here," I said, "but nothing startling." Lake had come out of nowhere two years earlier, at age seventeen, to win first prize in one of those reality talent shows on TV. Her parents were dead and she was pretty much on her own. She hailed from Cedar Rapids and Santillo's file even included a copy of her birth certificate under her real name of Lily Lafferty. I had to admit Lily Lake looked better on the marquees. Looking further, I found a photo of Lake with Sly Morgan, the reputed boyfriend. He was a good decade older than she was, with bare arms that showed off a couple of his spectacular tattoos.

"Here are two more tickets for tonight's show," Stacy said, pulling them out of the file folder. "He must have been planning to attend."

"Maybe he was going to take you," I suggested. "I think at this point we should all go to that concert."

The Melrose Concert Center was located across from the County Court Building in a part of downtown that hummed with activity during the day but usually dozed off after six o'clock. It was only two blocks from our office so we walked over, wearing raincoats

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against the misty drizzle that filled the night sky. This way we avoided the parking problem that always occurred when shows with the reigning pop stars came to town. I sent Stacy and Mike in to claim the seats from Santillo's file drawer while I kept Mike's ticket and headed backstage. A burly security guard didn't let me get far. I showed my ID and asked to see Lily's business manager.

About ten minutes before the start of the concert he appeared, a short bald man named Art Brunner. "The guard said a detective needed to see me. What about?"

"I'm private," I told him, showing my ID again. "It's about the killing of a man named Santillo last night."

"I don't know a thing about it."

"He was gathering information on Lily Lake."

"So are half the people in the country. She's already a big star and she's going to be huge." His smile of pleasure revealed a row of yellow, crooked teeth. I hoped he'd make enough off Lily's concerts to get them fixed.

"Could I speak with her?"

"Not a chance before the concert. She rests up and doesn't see anyone before."

"How about after?"

"I'll ask her. She might give you five minutes. She's a star, you know?"

"Is Sly Morgan in with her now?"

His face hardened. "What're you, from the tabloids? Her personal life is personal. She doesn't like people asking about it." He turned away and the conversation was over.

I found my seat over on the right side of the auditorium just as the curtain went up on the opening act, a hard-rock trio that blasted my eardrums. They played for a numbing forty-five minutes and then there was a brief intermission before Lily Lake took the stage, backed by her own group. The young crowd went wild when she appeared center stage wearing low-slung white jeans and a fringed top that left her navel and midsection exposed. It was the proper costume for a teen rock star and they wouldn't have expected anything else. Lily Lake was short and slim, appearing almost tiny on that big stage, but she whirled like a dervish, clutching her wireless mike as she belted out an anthem to infidelity, about high school romance and the next guy who comes along. It wasn't my sort of music, even if it was a notch up from the hard rock.

Lily sang and cavorted for a full hour before she called it quits, and then came back for a double encore. It was about ten-twenty by the time she finished, to the screaming delight of her fans. I looked around for Mike and Stacy but couldn't find them in the crowd. Instead I made my way backstage once more. This time Art Brunner was nowhere in sight and the place was filled with teenage girls trying any scheme to get closer to their idol. I finally

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spotted Brunner with two security guards trying to clear the backstage area. Avoiding them, I was heading toward the star's dressing room when a hand grabbed me from behind by my coat collar. "Where you goin', old man?" a raspy voice asked.

I twisted around enough to see the tattooed arm and knew I was in the grip of Sly Morgan. "I wanted to speak with Lily Lake, but you'll do for now."

"Lily's resting after her performance, and she's not likely to see you anyway. Who are you?"

"Al Darlan, Darlan and Trapper Investigations. I'm looking into the murder of a man named Rich Santillo last night."

He loosened his grip on my collar and shoved me into an alcove beneath a spiral staircase to the upstairs dressing rooms. "We don't keep up with the local news. When you're touring like Lily one city's the same as another."

"Santillo was a stringer for the tabloids. He had a hot story, too hot for somebody."

"How does it involve Lily?"

"He had lots of information on her, and he was killed while she was in town. Where were you around eight last night?"

"Watching her performance, same as tonight. I fly in to some of her tour stops when I get the chance."

"So the tabloids are right about you two. Why keep it a secret?"

He grinned. "She's a bit young for me. You know how people are."

"Not anymore, I don't. If Santillo uncovered a secret about Lily, might you or her manager have killed him to keep it a secret?"

Sly Morgan snorted. "What's a secret worth these days? Certainly not murder! Anything they could write about Lily would only increase her sales. The teenagers would eat it up."

"Anything?"

"You name it. Did she make a sex video? Did she snort cocaine? Is she really a lesbian? Hell, she probably could have killed her mother and it wouldn't hurt her popularity. We're in the 21st century!"

"Did she?"

"What?"

"Kill her mother?"

"Both her parents died in an auto accident when she was three. You didn't read through all those clippings you said Santillo had."

"Maybe it's something else. Maybe she's a guy."

He snickered at that. "Lily's no guy, believe me."

"Can I see her? I'd like to talk to her, ask her a couple of questions."

"Will that satisfy you?"

"I hope so."

"Wait here," he said, and went off toward her dressing room.

I lingered backstage among the musicians and dancers for nearly ten minutes before he returned for me. "I really had to talk her into it. Follow me, and keep it short."

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Lily Lake was wearing a dressing gown that made her look smaller than she was. She had a winning smile when she used it, but after her first greeting to me she was all business. "What's this about?" she asked. "Who is this man who got killed? I know nothing about him."

"Rich Santillo. When pop stars like you played here he sold the tabloids gossip items. I have a partner who does some of that too."

"You're a great crowd!"

I shrugged. "You lose some privacy when you become a star."

"They want to know about Sly and me. That's all they're interested in."

"You know how teenage girls are."

"I should. They're my public. They come to my performances, buy my albums."

"Could Sly or your business manager, Art Brunner, have had a motive for shutting Santillo up?

"You mean kill him? My God, I think you people are all crazy around here! If he was in the gossip business he might have had any number of enemies."

"He had a file of clippings about you. And you're in town. He might have tried to contact you."

"He didn't. I never heard of the man before. You're the one who had the office next to him, not me."

Sly Morgan moved in then. "Your time is up, Mr. Darlan. Say goodbye."

On my way out Lily Lake asked, "Would you like my autograph?"

"Next time."

I couldn't find Mike and Stacy anywhere, and the next morning I asked him where they'd gone. "Stopped for a drink and then I took her home," he said. "We didn't see you."

"I went backstage to interview Lily Lake. That lasted about five minutes."

"Find out anything?"

"Just that she has a business manager and a boyfriend who are very protective of her. But I suppose that's not surprising. She's only nineteen, with lots of crazy fans."

"You think one of them killed Santillo?"

"It's possible. Both claim they were at the Concert Center watching Lily's performance, but either one could easily have slipped away. We're only two blocks from there."

"I have to go out," Mike told me a bit later. "I'm meeting Vance Oberline for lunch."

"I thought you were through with him."

"He says it's important."

I went back to my computer and found a phone number for the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*. When I reached them I identified myself

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and told them I was searching for news of a fatal auto accident involving a family named Lafferty, some sixteen years ago. The clerk kept me on the line for a few minutes while he searched, then came back with the information. "Here it is, on March twenty-seventh of that year. There'd been a late winter storm and the roads were slippery. Roland and Sally Lafferty were both killed instantly and their three-year-old daughter Lily was injured."

"She was in the car with them?"

"That's right."

"Thanks. You've been a big help."

I hung up and thought about it. I was still thinking fifteen minutes later when Stacy Cline showed up at the office. "Hi. Is Mike around?" she asked.

"He had a lunch date."

"Too bad. I was going to buy him lunch in return for the ticket last night and taking me home after."

"I'm his partner. You can take me to lunch if you'd like."

The phone rang and I excused myself to answer it. "This is the *Cedar Rapids Gazette.* You phoned us for some information about an accident earlier."

"That's right."

"I followed up on reports of the accident for the next several days. I thought you might want to know that the little girl died too, three days later."

"Did you know about this?" I asked Stacy when I'd relayed the news to her.

"I—no, he didn't tell me everything. I was just a file clerk, to make the office look legit."

"But you knew he collected information on Lily Lake, among others. You knew he had a copy of her birth certificate, under her original name."

"I knew that, yes," she admitted.

"But you didn't know the real Lily died at age three?"

"I—" She was interrupted by a new arrival, Sergeant Ramous.

He walked in the door behind her and said, "Just the two people I'm looking for. We're finished with Santillo's office, Miss Cline, if you want to retrieve any belongings from it. I took the tape off the door."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

"Now about you, Al. Trapper tells me he's discovered the dead man was bugging your office. That true?"

"It seems to be. Mike's been selling some celebrity news items to the tabloids and I guess Santillo was trying to hijack them."

"That must have made Trapper pretty angry."

I shook my head. "You're barking up the wrong tree. He didn't discover it till after the murder."

"Who's this fellow Vance Oberline? We checked on Santillo's

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phone calls and there were several to and from Oberline."

"A tabloid stringer. He was Mike's contact, and I suppose he might have been Santillo's, too."

"Would he have had any motive for killing the man?"

"Not that I know of. I think the killing might have had something to do with Lily Lake's concerts here this week, though. Maybe there was something about her past that would have harmed her popularity. Information that might have been reason enough for Sly Morgan or her business manager, Brunner, to have visited Santillo two nights ago."

"You might know more than you're telling," Ramous said.

"Talk to them. Ask them about it."

Sergeant Ramous was noncommittal, but as he left I knew I'd planted the seed in his mind. After he'd gone, Stacy asked, "Why'd you want to do that? If the killer thinks you know something damaging, he might come after you like he did Santillo."

"That's what I'm hoping for. I'll be sitting here tonight about the same time and see what happens. Meanwhile I'll be going over every scrap of paper about Lily Lake in Santillo's files. If she's not Lily Lafferty, or Lake, who is she?"

Later that afternoon I told Mike what I'd done. "You're asking for trouble, Al. Oberline says Santillo had a really big story. He'll pay big if I can get it to him before the national press gets hold of it."

"I want you at the concert hall tonight. Try to keep an eye on Brunner and Sly Morgan. If either of them leaves, follow him."

He didn't like that. "You got your gun?"

"In the safe."

"Get it out, Al."

I promised I would, and then sent downstairs for a sandwich and beer. I wanted to finish going through Santillo's files before I had any visitors. Lily Lake's file was first, and that was easy. The real Lily was long dead. He had another file labeled *Identity Theft* and I turned to that next. I knew all the tricks about forging a false identity—taking a name off a tombstone, procuring a birth certificate for the person, and then using it to obtain a social-security card. That might have been what Lily Lake had done, but why would that be shocking enough to cause a murder? As Sly had pointed out, this was the twenty-first century, when virtually anything goes, especially when it comes to a young, attractive rock star.

I'd finished my sandwich and beer and was near the end of the file when I found what I was looking for. I didn't know how Santillo had come across it in the first place, when all the tabloids missed it, but then I remembered they'd missed the real Lily's death too, probably because they'd never followed up on the auto accident that killed her parents. It was just after eight o'clock and I heard the outer office door quietly open.

"Come in," I called out. "I've been expecting you, Lily."

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"Have you?" she asked. She was wearing a black hooded raincoat that did a perfect job of concealing her identity.

"I thought it would have to be Sly or Art Brunner, because your show started at eight. But then I remembered you have a forty-five-minute opening act and an intermission before you take the stage, and Sly told me you like to be absolutely alone before each performance. It wouldn't have been too difficult leaving by the stage door and walking the two blocks to this office to shoot Rich Santillo."

"You don't know a thing," she told me.

"I know you mentioned Santillo's office was right next to mine, even though you claimed never to have heard of him." I opened the file on my desk. "And I finally figured out who you really are, with a little help from Santillo's research. I know why you had to kill him." I saw her hand move inside the raincoat pocket. "Don't shoot me through the pocket. The powder burn might be noticed when you hurry back to the Melrose for your concert."

Her hand came out, holding the little pistol. "I'm sorry about this," she said as she raised the weapon. "I didn't want to kill him but he would have ruined my career, everything I'd worked for."

"There'll be somebody else after me. You can't kill them all to hide your secret."

"I can try," she said, and that was when Stacy Cline came up behind her and hit her with a bookend.

"We may have to hire you after all," I told Stacy later, when Lily Lake had been taken under guard to the hospital and Sergeant Ramous was waiting for an explanation.

"We've got the pistol," he said, "and it's probably the murder weapon. But we still need a motive."

I glanced over at Mike Trapper. "I'm sorry, Mike. This story might have made tabloid history, but every paper in the country will have it by morning." I spread out the clippings and documents from Santillo's file. "She had no time to search for these, especially when she realized I was in the next office. You see, she stole the identity of a dead child to become a seventeen-year-old entrant on a TV reality show. She did better than she could have dreamed, winning first prize and going on to concert tours and gold records."

"You really think an identity theft would have ruined her career?" Mike asked.

"Not that alone, but Santillo was able to trace her real identity. Her name was Naomi Crawford and she'd been living in New Zealand for several years. No one in America knew her. She was without a past, except for the one she invented."

"And?"

"And what would her millions of teenage fans have done when they discovered their nineteen-year-old idol was a thirty-one-year-old woman?" ●

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Crash Tackle

by Keith Miles

The crime did not come to light until Tuesday evening when they arrived for the training session. As soon as they stepped inside the clubhouse, they were met by an overwhelming stink of beer.

"What the hell is going on?" demanded Neil Woodville, leading the way swiftly to the bar. He felt something moist underfoot and came to a halt. "Jesus!"

A string of expletives followed and even Peter Rayment, normally so restrained, gave vent to some foul language. The whole of the bar was awash with beer. Someone had opened the taps on every barrel and the alcohol had poured out in a series of small rivulets. Not only was the bar in an appalling state—its carpet sodden, the legs of its furniture inch-deep in brown sludge—but there would be no draught beer for those coming to Shelton Rugby Football Club that evening. It was nothing short of disaster. Training sessions were extremely hard. Players worked up a healthy thirst.

"I blame Doug for this," decided Woodville.

"That's ridiculous."

"He forgot to check the taps last thing on Saturday."

"Doug would never do that," said Rayment, defensively. "You blame him for everything, Neil, and it's not fair. He does his job well."

"Not in my book."

"You tried to stop us hiring him in the first place."

"And now you can see why," said Woodville with a gesture that took in the whole of the room. "Look around—he's ruined the place with his incompetence."

"This is not a case of incompetence—it's sabotage."

"Then you can bet that Doug Lomas is behind it."

Neil Woodville was a chunky man in his forties, a former prop whose weight had gone up dramatically since he stopped playing.

Keith Miles worked in theater, radio, and television while pursuing his career as a novelist and short-story writer. The prolific author has some forty crime novels in print; the latest one in the U.S., under his popular pseudonym Edward Marston, is *The Princess of Denmark: An Elizabethan Theater Mystery Featuring Nicholas Bracewell.* (St. Martin's Press; 8/06).

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A sly punch off the ball had left him with a broken nose that gave his face a sort of crumpled dignity. Peter Rayment, by contrast, was a tall, thin, bespectacled man in his late thirties with a diffident manner. As club secretary, he was a tireless workhorse, handling all the paperwork and doing a dozen other important jobs behind the scenes. By profession, Rayment was an accountant. Woodville, the waddling vice-chairman of the club, ran his own scrap-metal business.

"I'll call the police," said Woodville, taking out his mobile phone.

"Wait for Martin."

"Why?"

"It's his decision," warned Rayment.

"Well, I'm taking it instead of him. This is a crime scene. We need to report the fact straightaway. Wait for Martin!" he said with contempt. "What bloody use will he be in an emergency like this? The last thing we need right now is a man in a wheelchair. Besides," he added, his lip curling, "it was Martin who foisted Doug Lomas onto us. Our chairman has a lot to answer for."

Martin Hewlett knew at once that there was something wrong. When the clubhouse came in sight, he could see no players out on the pitch. Instead of going through their routines, they were clustered in the car park. None of them had even changed into his kit.

"What's the matter?" he said, peering through the windscreen.

"Perhaps they can't get in," suggested his wife, Rosie, at the steering wheel. "Maybe Neil hasn't turned up with the key."

"Neil *always* turns up with the key. It's an act of faith with him. In any case, I can see his BMW. We've got problems, Rosie."

"Then let someone else sort them out for a change."

"But I'm the *chairman.*"

It was a matter of great pride to Martin Hewlett that he was chairman of a successful rugby club that ran three regular teams and a youth side. Every Saturday, sixty players took the field, wearing the colors of Shelton RFC, and they maintained the high standard of play that their many supporters had come to expect. Hewlett had been an outstanding captain of the First XV until a crash tackle had brought his playing career to a sudden end and left him paralyzed from the waist down. Others might have been disillusioned with the game as a result but Hewlett's love of rugby seemed to increase. Unable to play, he threw himself wholeheartedly into the running of the club.

He was a big, broad-shouldered man with a ready smile and an unforced geniality. Hewlett was also very popular. When his car came to a halt, a number of players immediately came across to him. While they were helping him into his motorized wheelchair, they gave him varying accounts of what had happened. Neil

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Woodville pushed through the knot of players to give the newcomers a nod of welcome.

"I've rung the boys in blue," he said.

"I'm more interested in the boys in blue and white," said Hewlett, referring to the club colors. "Why aren't they training? Cup match on Saturday. We need to be at our peak."

"They wanted to see the damage, Martin."

"They should think about the damage to their fitness instead. Go on," he urged, clapping his hands. "Get changed and get out there. If you work hard, I'll let you lick the carpet dry in the bar afterwards."

After some good-natured badinage, the players drifted off to the changing rooms and left Hewlett and Rosie alone with Neil Woodville. The vice-chairman's suspicions had had time to harden into certainty.

"I think that Doug Lomas is at the root of all this," he said.

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Hewlett.

"It's his revenge because we refused to put his wages up."

"Doug is not a vengeful sort of person."

"No," said Rosie, stoutly. "He works hard. He has to, now that they have a child to look after. Doug *needs* this job. Why would he do anything that might make him lose it?"

"I don't trust him," said Woodville.

"You don't trust anyone."

"Rosie is right," said her husband, twisting in his wheelchair. "You never give a man the benefit of the doubt. All right, Doug Lomas is no saint. We knew that when we took him on. But my brother vouched for him and that's good enough for me."

"Well, it's not good enough for me," snapped Woodville. "Once a thief, always a thief. That's my feeling."

"I can see why you didn't become a probation officer," said Rosie.

"Whereas my brother did," noted Hewlett. "Adam deals with ex-cons all the time. His job is to keep them from reoffending."

Woodville was blunt. "He slipped up badly with Doug Lomas."

"This crime has nothing to do with him, Neil."

"Then who did turn those taps on—the Phantom Beer Spiller?"

"I'd have thought there were two obvious suspects."

"Go on—surprise me."

"First of all, there's our neighbors," said Hewlett, pointing towards a nearby campsite. "I've lost count of the number of times the gypsies have tried to buy some of our land so that they can increase the number of permanent caravans. They've got more reason for revenge than Doug."

"You said there were two obvious suspects."

"We're playing the other one on Saturday."

"Crowford?"

"Who else?" asked Hewlett. "This is just the kind of stunt that they'd pull. We've had a terrific season, Crowford have been crap.

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They know we'll beat them hollow on Saturday in the elimination match. We'll kick seven barrels of shit out of them."

"No need to be vulgar, Martin," said his wife. "We take your point."

"Question is—does Neil take it as well?"

"Yes," admitted Woodville, thinking it through, "and you may be on to something. Last time we played Crowford, someone let down the tires of my car as a joke. And we know how their team cheats like mad on the pitch. This could be down to them, Martin."

"Or to the gypsies," Rosie reminded him.

"Anyone but Doug," added Hewlett. The sound of a motorbike made him turn his head round. "Talk of the devil—here he is."

"Late as usual," complained Woodville.

"Bang on time, I'd say."

Hewlett checked his watch, then waited until the motorbike bumped its way down the rough track that led to the club. Shelton RFC was situated in a leafy corner of Warwickshire, a beautiful, isolated spot whose tranquillity was only ever shattered by occasional jet aircraft from Birmingham International Airport some four miles away. Reaching the club meant a long drive for Doug Lomas, yet he was invariably punctual. He switched off his engine, dismounted, then put his motorbike up on its stand. Pulling off his crash helmet, he gave them a wary grin.

"What's this, then?" he asked. "A reception committee?"

"You've got some explaining to do," said Woodville aggressively.

"Leave this to me, Neil," said Hewlett, "and give the man time to get his breath back." He smiled at the barman. "Hello, Doug. Looks as if you won't be pulling too many pints this evening."

"Oh?" Fearing dismissal, the barman was cautious. "Why not?"

"We've been attacked by our rivals—Crowford."

"Attacked?"

"They cut off our beer supply."

As he propelled himself towards the clubhouse, Hewlett gave him a brief account of what had happened, then they viewed the damage for themselves. Doug Lomas was horrified when he saw the state of the bar. He took the sabotage as a personal insult.

"I cleaned up in here on Saturday night," he said balefully, "and left the place spotless. Then I switched on the burglar alarm and locked up. There's no sign of forced entry. How could anyone get in here to do something like this?"

"The police will ask the same thing," said Rosie, glancing through the window at an approaching patrol car. "Here they are. I suggest that we get out of here and let them take over."

After taking statements and examining the scene of the crime for evidence, the police authorized a cleanup of the bar. Doug Lomas was the first to grab a mop. Short, stringy, and still in his twenties, he was deeply grateful to the club for giving him paid employ-

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ment, even if it was only for one full day and three evenings a week. It was the start he needed after coming out of prison. Having stolen to support a drug habit, Lomas had turned his back on crime and narcotics, and was leading a much happier life now that he was sharing it with his girlfriend and baby son.

The position at Shelton RFC was only one of five part-time jobs that he did in the course of a week, but it was his favorite. He liked rugby, got on well with the players, and ran the bar efficiently. Though he handled a large amount of money when the bar was full, not a penny had ever gone astray. With the glaring exception of Neil Woodville, everyone trusted him and he repaid that trust with total commitment to his work. While the barman mopped away, Peter Rayment moved all the furniture out of the room. Rosie Hewlett helped him, using a cloth to wipe the chairs and tables dry.

"I can manage, Rosie," said Peter. "You keep an eye on Martin."

"He's fine. Martin is much better off watching the training session from the touchline and yelling at the players. Good exercise for his lungs. Anyway," Rosie went on, grabbing another table, "this is no time to stand on ceremony. It's a case of all hands to the pumps."

Peter had the greatest admiration for her. Rosie was a buxom woman in her thirties with a practical streak that had come to the fore since her husband had been disabled. That streak was in evidence now as she heaved the furniture about. Unlike many of the players' wives, Rosie had an insider's knowledge of the game, having played rugby herself and represented the county in a Women's XV. The crash tackle that ended Martin Hewlett's days on a rugby field had also separated her from the sport. It was a double loss.

"That's it," said Rosie as the last of the chairs was moved out of the bar. "We'll give Doug a hand to mop up the beer then get that carpet out of there. It stinks to high heaven."

"One moment," said Rayment, a gentle hand on her arm. "There's something I think you should know. It's about Neil Woodville."

She heaved a sigh. "It always is!"

"I don't need to tell you how much he resents Martin."

"Martin is the heart and soul of this club," she said loyally. "He's put years of his life into it, on and off the field. It's about time that Neil accepted that and stopped bitching."

"He's got friends, Rosie."

"Friends?"

"You know the way Neil works—buying drinks, whispering in ears, building up his own little gang of sycophants. Except that it's not so little anymore."

"What are you trying to tell me?" she asked.

"There's a plot to oust Martin."

"But he was elected chairman by majority decision."

"That majority might not still be there," said Rayment worriedly. "Neil has been busy. I've done a quick head count and I think the

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vote will be close—too close, for my liking. Neil wants to call an Extraordinary General Meeting to pass a vote of no confidence in Martin."

"That's downright cruel!"

"The awful thing is that it might succeed."

"We can't have Neil Woodville as chairman."

"A lot of people think that we should."

"He's got to be stopped."

"That won't be easy," he warned. "I just wanted to tip you the wink so that you can alert Martin. He can always rely on my vote."

"Thank you, Peter. You're a real friend."

"Neil is so ambitious. He'll stop at nothing." He looked over his shoulder to make sure that nobody else was listening. "And that raises a strange possibility."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you heard the statements we gave to the police. Neil still wants to blame our barman for the mess in there. Martin is convinced that Crowford may be the villains of the piece, and neither he nor Neil has ruled out the gypsies on our doorstep."

"We've had trouble with them before."

"Quite. But suppose we add another name to the list of suspects."

"And who's that?" Rosie saw the look in his eye. "Neil?"

"Why not?"

She shook her head. "No, Peter. He's got a lot of faults but I don't think he'd stoop to this. Why cause damage to a club when he wants to be its chairman?"

"Because it undermines Martin's position."

"Martin was not responsible," she retorted.

"Neil will make it look as if he is. You weren't at the committee meeting when we discussed the idea of having security cameras. Neil was all for it. Martin was against because we'd already spent a fortune on a state-of-the-art burglar alarm. Honestly," said Rayment, "I wouldn't want to sit through another meeting like that. It was a real dogfight. Talk about 'Nature red in tooth and claw.' Martin finally won the day, so we have no cameras. As a result—Neil will claim—we have no film of someone breaking in here to trash our bar."

"He's got a point," she conceded. "But hang on, Peter. Weren't you and Neil the ones who discovered what had happened? You said that he was as upset as you."

"He certainly *seemed* to be upset, Rosie. But that could have been an act. The simple fact is that this serves his purpose. Neil can kill two birds with one stone—he can blame Martin for not having security cameras installed and he can point the finger at the barman." He gave a mirthless laugh. "What price Doug's job if we have a new chairman? Neil would have him out of here in two seconds."

It was at that precise moment that Lomas appeared, sweating

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profusely from his exertions but wearing a smile of triumph.

"I've moved the empty barrels out," he said, "and connected three full ones. The lads will be able to have their booze, after all."

Martin Hewlett had an unfailing capacity to look on the bright side. Not even the horrendous injury that he had suffered could dampen his spirits. He saw it as an opportunity to direct his life to worthier goals, getting heavily involved in church and charity work. It was the same with the damage at the clubhouse. Hewlett pointed out an advantage.

"We needed a new carpet in the bar," he said airily. "I'll screw every penny I can get out of the insurance company and we'll be walking on luxury carpet up to our ankles." He laughed merrily. "The rest of you will, anyway. My walking days are over."

"How was the training session?"

"Good. Very good—once I lit a fire under them."

"You always could inspire a team, Martin."

"It's not inspiration but naked fear. I *frighten* the buggers."

Rosie was driving him home after the evening at the club. As usual, her husband had downed his fair share of beer and she knew that he would be asleep soon after she put him to bed. If she needed to raise a sensitive topic, now was the time.

"Peter had a quiet word with me earlier on," she began.

"Oh?"

"He wanted to pass on a warning."

"What about?"

"Neil Woodville."

Hewlett cackled. "Dear old Peter. He's been warning me about Neil for the last five years but I still haven't felt a knife between my shoulder blades. What's the latest scare?"

"It's more than a scare, Martin," she said. "There's a move to unseat you as chairman by passing a vote of no confidence."

"Bollocks!"

"And it's no good swearing. I'm telling you the truth."

"Nobody can unseat me. I was properly elected."

"The result could be overturned."

"Only if an Extraordinary General Meeting is called," he said, "and that would require twenty signatures."

"Neil has got them, apparently."

"Never!"

"I'm only telling you what Peter said."

Hewlett lapsed into a brooding silence. In the days when they had played on the same team, he and Woodville had been friends, but that had all changed. Woodville was now his implacable enemy, a man who was determined to take over the club and lift it to new heights. To that end, he had made generous donations to Shelton RFC, enabling them to buy auxiliary floodlights and to

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resurface the car park. In financial terms, Hewlett could never compete. Though he continued in his law firm, he was only there three days a week and was given a light workload. It was Rosie's salary as a college lecturer that really kept them afloat.

She pulled the car up their drive and switched off the engine.

"There is another way of looking at this," she said.

"Is there?"

"Maybe what happened at the club is a sort of sign."

"You sound like Neil," he said bitterly. "He reckons that it's a sign that Doug must go and security cameras must be installed."

"Being the chairman is such a strain on you, Martin."

"Nonsense!"

"It is. You make light of it but I know how anxious you get. There's always some new headache. Tonight's is just the latest one." She slipped an arm around him. "Perhaps it's time to consider retirement."

"And let that slimy Neil Woodville, take over? Oh, no!"

"You could spike his guns. If you were to announce that you'd resign at the end of the season, there'd be no need to call that EGM. You'd be spared any humiliation."

"What would be more humiliating than seeing Neil replace me?"

"But that might not happen," she reasoned. "If it was a straight fight between you and him, then he's in with a real chance. But if you were to nominate someone else as your successor, Neil could have the rug pulled from under him."

"Nominate someone else?" He shrugged expressively. "Who?"

"Simon Mifflin."

The name made Hewlett blink. It was an interesting notion. A well-liked former player, Mifflin ran a profitable building company and had donated far more money to the club than anyone. When he built the new grandstand for Shelton RFC, he gave them a generous discount. He was older than either Hewlett or Woodville, but was as dedicated to the club as either of them. Mifflin commanded wide respect.

"Simon could never beat you," said Rosie, "but he'd leave Neil standing, especially if he had your endorsement. It could be the answer, Martin. You're spared the hassle yet you'd still have huge influence on affairs through Simon. It's the best of both worlds."

"It would certainly leave Neil with egg on his face."

"Why not give Simon a ring tomorrow?"

"No," he replied. "I'm not turning my back on a fight."

"I don't want to see you hurt, Martin."

"I've never lost a committee punch-up yet."

"Think of the upheaval it will cause to the club."

"All I'm thinking about is putting Neil in his place once and for all." He squeezed her hand affectionately. "I know you have my best interests at heart, Rosie, and I love you for it, but I'm not

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afraid. I'll defy any motion of no confidence and come out of it stronger than ever."

"Martin—"

"No," he said firmly. "My mind is made up. I stay."

"In that case, I'll support you to the hilt. So will Peter."

"God bless you both!"

"By the way," she said, opening the car door, "Peter thinks we should put someone else on the list of suspects."

"And who's that?"

"Neil himself. Let's get you inside, then I'll tell you why."

After a storming victory against Crowford on the following Saturday, the players felt entitled to celebrate, even if it meant doing so on the bare floor of the clubhouse bar. The place was crowded and Doug Lomas was grateful for the assistance of a couple of volunteers. It was a long day for the barman. Having arrived midmorning, he would not come off duty until well after midnight. Lomas did not mind that. Long hours meant more money and he enjoyed the camaraderie that really blossomed on such occasions. He felt part of it. People like Neil Woodville might treat him with frank suspicion, but most of the club members liked their barman. He was friendly and hard-working.

Because he had to drive home on his motorbike, Lomas never drank on duty. While others ordered round after round, he remained sober and was able to watch the effects of alcohol on them. Towards the end of the celebrations, he was washing glasses behind the bar with the help of Peter Rayment, always a man to take on some of the more menial chores when needed. Lomas drew his attention to Martin Hewlett.

"He can really put his beer away. Did he always drink that much?"

"No," said Rayment. "Martin loves a pint but he didn't used to get plastered in the way he does now. I feel sorry for Rosie. He's a big man. It's not easy to put him to bed when he's in that state."

"What was he like as a player?"

"Martin? He was brilliant. First-team captain for five consecutive years. They were real glory days. Martin was good enough to play rugby as a full-time professional, but he was too loyal to Shelton."

"Then he had that freak accident," said Lomas.

"I know. I was playing fullback in that match."

"What exactly happened?"

"Martin was on the wing," recalled the other, "and they put in this high kick over his head. He ran back after it but the ball bounced way above his head. He leapt up like a basketball player to pluck it out of the air. Unfortunately, one of their players crash-tackled him from behind." He gave a shudder. "There was this

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almighty thud as he hit the ground and that was that. It was gruesome, Doug."

"So he was tackled when he was in midair?"

"Yes, that was an offence, for a start. But the man who thundered into his back didn't worry about the rules. Martin had already scored two tries that afternoon, so it was a deliberate attempt to knock him out of the game. Not that there was any intention to cause permanent damage, mind you," Rayment said. "But that was the result."

"Poor man!"

"A tragedy—for Martin and for his wife."

"Yet he never talks about it."

"That's him all over. No good crying over spilt milk, he always says. Since he can't play, he's devoted himself to running the club instead. And I, for one, think he's done a grand job."

"So do I," said Lomas, "but not everyone agrees, I'm afraid."

"No, Doug."

"I heard rumors that Mr. Woodville is trying to replace him."

"We'll see."

"If that happens, I can kiss this job goodbye."

"Then we'll have to make sure that it doesn't happen, won't we?" said Rayment cheerily. "A good barman is worth his weight in gold."

"I do my best."

"I know that. More importantly, so does Martin." He saw Hewlett waving to him. "Pull him a last pint, Doug, he wants one for the road."

News of the outrage reached the club chairman on the following morning. Propped up in bed, Martin Hewlett was having a late breakfast when the telephone rang. Rosie was on hand to pick up the receiver. An anxious voice came on the line.

"Mrs. Hewlett? It's Doug Lomas here."

"Oh, hello."

"Any chance of speaking to your husband?"

"He's having his breakfast at the moment. Can you ring back?"

"This is urgent. It won't keep."

"In that case, hold on." She passed the phone to Hewlett. "It's Doug Lomas and he sounds upset about something."

"Doug?" said Hewlett, speaking into the receiver. "What's up?"

"It's happened again," replied Lomas.

"What has?"

"Someone's flooded the bar again."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm ringing from the clubhouse. When I got up today, I had this funny feeling that something was wrong so I drove over here just in case. It's maddening," said Lomas. "To make sure we

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wouldn't lose any more beer, I disconnected the barrels before I left last night. Someone must have connected them up again and left the taps open."

"Bastard!"

"And that wasn't the only thing."

Hewlett listened with horror as the barman told him what he had found. He became so agitated that Rosie lifted the tray from his lap and moved it to a place of safety.

"Call the police, Doug," said Hewlett. "I'm on my way."

"You're not going anywhere in a hurry," said Rosie, taking the phone from him. "What's all this about the police?"

"Doug is at the clubhouse. Someone's vandalized the place."

"Not again!"

"It's worse this time," said Hewlett. "The intruder wasn't content with spilling barrels of beer all over the place. He smashed our display cases, broke up all the team photographs hanging on the walls, and tore down the honors board."

"That's dreadful," said Rosie, knowing how much it meant to her husband to see his name on the board five times in gold lettering. "Who could possibly do a thing like that?"

"Some clever dick from Crowford."

"I can't believe that, Martin."

"Never mind what you believe," he said irritably. "I need to get over there. Help me to dress, Rosie. This is a crisis."

"Then ring Peter. Let him take charge. Learn to delegate."

"It's my responsibility. Drive me to the clubhouse."

"But you haven't even shaved yet."

"Who cares?"

"At least finish your breakfast."

"No," he said, throwing back the bedsheets. "Food can wait. I have to be there before Neil Woodville catches wind of this. Hurry up, Rosie. There's no time to waste."

Sunday afternoon found a hastily assembled work party clearing up the mess at the clubhouse. The police had come, but the intruder had left no visible clues for them. Rosie Hewlett had joined the others in removing the debris. Her husband sat alone before the shattered honors board on which the names of the club captains for the past fifty years were listed, along with the various trophies won by Shelton RFC. Hewlett was torn between tears and impotent rage.

To his credit, Neil Woodville had rolled up his sleeves and taken his turn with a mop. When the bar was cleaned, and the worst of the stink had fled through the open windows, Woodville took Peter Rayment aside.

"This proves that it was Doug," he insisted.

"That's absurd. It was Doug who raised the alarm."

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"Yes, but what brought him here in the first place?"

"Instinct," said Rayment. "Pure instinct. He had a strange feeling that something was amiss and he drove over here."

"Well, I think that he wrecked the place when he arrived."

"No!"

"It all goes back to that wage rise we turned down."

"This isn't to do with money, Neil. Look at the facts. The clubhouse has been attacked twice now but nothing at all has been stolen. There's hundreds of pounds' worth of spirits and liqueurs here, not to mention all the silver cups we've won over the years. If Doug was the culprit," argued Rayment, "don't you think he'd have made off with a tidy haul? And why would any man who'd committed a crime then report it to the police?"

"That was a cunning ploy."

"No, this was done by someone from Crowford."

"Or by someone from Crowford who *paid* Doug Lomas."

"Don't be stupid."

"It's a possibility. I mentioned it on the quiet to the coppers."

"No wonder they were giving our barman such a grilling."

"Security cameras," said Woodville solemnly. "That's what we should have installed. An isolated clubhouse like this needs protection. First thing tomorrow, I'm going to contact a security firm."

"That's a committee decision."

"This is too important to be left to the committee."

"Then let Martin take over," said Rayment. "He's the chairman."

Woodville was determined. "I'm going over his head," he said. "It's the only way to get anything done around here. Wait for Martin to take action and we could wait forever. This club needs a chairman with real initiative—not a bloody cripple trying to relive his playing days from a wheelchair."

In spite of the protests of Martin Hewlett, closed-circuit cameras were installed almost immediately. Since he insisted on paying for them, Neil Woodville was the first person to see them in operation. He was certain that they would act as a deterrent and, for a couple of weeks, they seemed to do just that. There were no further incidents. Shelton RFC then won the cup in a thrilling final that was in the balance until the very last minute. It was an occasion for a riotous party in the clubhouse that went on into the small hours. Doug Lomas had a lot of clearing up to do afterwards. The last thing he did before he locked up was to switch on the burglar alarm and the cameras.

The night wore on. It was almost dawn when a car pulled up in the lane at the rear of the clubhouse. A hooded figure got out and moved furtively across the field. Taking care to approach the building in a blind spot between two cameras, the intruder used a key to open the door and stepped quickly inside. The security sys-

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tem was switched off at once. The clubhouse was now at the mercy of its nocturnal visitor yet again. It was time to inflict some real damage.

The intruder had brought some rags that had been soaked in paraffin. Shelton RFC would not merely lose its supply of draught beer this time. Its clubhouse would go up in smoke. Before a match could be struck, however, the lights suddenly went on and Doug Lomas came charging into the bar to jump on the arsonist. They fell to the floor and rolled over. The barman was just about to throw a first punch when he realized whom he had caught.

"Mrs. Hewlett!" he cried. "What are *you* doing here?"

Martin Hewlett was roused early that morning. After a night of steady drinking, he usually slept for twelve hours, but his wife shook him awake. He was surprised to see Doug Lomas standing at the foot of his bed.

"Don't tell me there's been more trouble!" moaned Hewlett.

Lomas shifted his feet uneasily. "Your wife will explain."

"Explain what?"

She took a deep breath and launched into her story. Hewlett was so shocked at what he heard that he felt as if he were being hit by the fatal crash tackle all over again. At the moment of impact, his whole body went numb. There was a mist before his eyes. The sense of panic and helplessness returned.

"Can this be true?" he gasped.

"I hate the game, Martin," she confessed. "It gave me a lot at one time but it took away far more. It cost me my husband, my lover, my best friend, my chances of ever having that child we wanted."

"Maybe I shouldn't hear all this," said Lomas, embarrassed.

"No, no," she insisted. "You've earned the right. You stopped me from doing something I'd have been ashamed of for the rest of my life." She bit her lip. "I was desperate, Martin. I married this wonderful man, then he disappeared in a split second one afternoon on a rugby field. Instead of being a wife, I'm nothing but an unpaid carer, feeding you, dressing and undressing you, seeing to your needs, taking you here and there, stage-managing your public appearances. And I don't mind doing any of that," she went on with passion, "because you're my husband and I love you. But I simply couldn't go on putting this helpless drunk to bed every time you went to the clubhouse. I couldn't go on hearing the name of Shelton Rugby Football Club, morning, noon, and night. I just couldn't take any more. It was killing me."

Hewlett was dazed. "Was I such a monster?"

"It's not your fault, Martin. I can see that. It was the game itself. I felt that I just had to get you away from it somehow. It's ruining what we have of a life together. Our whole marriage has been crash-tackled." She gave a wan smile. "At least I got what I

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wanted. You'll have to resign now. Shelton RFC can't have a chairman whose wife is serving a prison sentence."

"That's not going to happen," said Lomas firmly.

"It must, Doug. I deserve my punishment."

"They can't prosecute without a witness, and there's no way you'll get me into court again. I've been on the wrong side of the law, yet your husband gave me a second chance. I appreciate that. One good turn deserves another. Nobody need know what happened at the clubhouse tonight," he went on, looking Rosie in the eye. "Especially Mr. Woodville. If he knew that I'd spent the night there, he'd probably sue me for trespass. My only concern is that the place is still standing and I still have a job as barman."

"You deserve a medal for what you did, Doug," said Hewlett.

"Yes," agreed Rosie. "Thank God you were there."

"Let's keep the police out of this," advised Lomas. "This is between the two of you—nobody else." He moved to the door. "Goodbye."

They stared at each other in silence, not even hearing the front door open and shut. Rosie was contrite, but it was her husband who felt most at fault. His obsession with the club had blinded him to the strain it placed on Rosie. His behavior had driven a law-abiding wife to commit a succession of crimes. It was a cry for help that had to be answered.

Reaching for the telephone, he dialed a number and waited.

"Simon?" he said as he heard the familiar voice of Simon Mifflin. "Good morning. Martin here. How would you like to be the next chairman of Shelton RFC? . . . No, no, don't argue. I'm stepping down at the end of the season and want you to take over. . . . I'm sure that a large majority will vote you in. There's just one proviso, if you want my backing. . . . Doug Lomas *must* stay on as barman. He's been a real hero for us. At the next committee meeting, I'll make sure that we increase his wages. . . . And by the way, the insurance company has been bellyaching about our claims so—to hell with them! I'll foot the bill for any damage we incurred at the clubhouse. It's my parting shot as chairman. . . . What's that? . . . I'll tell you when I see you, Simon. Cheerio." Hewlett put the receiver down. "He was asking why I decided to retire."

"What are you going to tell him?" she asked softly.

"The truth, love. You talked me into it."

"I'm so sorry, Martin. I was at the end of my tether."

"Not anymore. You'll take precedence from now on, Rosie, and who am I to complain? When you're confined to a wheelchair," he said with a ripe chuckle, "you have to let your wife push you around." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

MAKEOVER

by Bill James

Of course, the murmur went around the Monty Club in Shield Terrace more or less immediately and—also, of course—reached its owner, Ralph Ember. Versions did vary in detail, but all said a club member, Cordell Maximillian Misk, known mostly as Articulate Max, somehow wangled himself into the team who did the copycat bank raid on International Corporate Diverse Securities and came away with a very delightful individual share in untraceables. So when Articulate turned up with his mother and great-aunt Edna at the club, asking to see Ralph personally, he had an idea what they wanted, even before any conversation began. Ralph was in his upstairs office at the time testing the mechanisms of a couple of Heckler & Koch automatics. A barman called on the intercom to tell Ember they would like a conference.

It was the press, not Ember, who gave the International Corporate Diverse Securities raid this "copycat" title, because it seemed so accurately modelled on that huge suction job done at the Northern Bank in Belfast, maybe by the IRA, in December 2004. Although the takings from I.C.D.S. in Kelita Street, Holborn, London, were not up to the Belfast haul of £26 million, the methodology looked similar: basically, get among the bank executives'

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families and keep them hostage until the managers opened up the vaults and let the money go. Ralph thought the idea might have come from an American novel and film, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle.*

The I.C.D.S. product, as Ralph heard it, varied from £21 million to £12 million. Even the larger amount did fall short of Belfast, but both these lesser figures were clearly satisfactory millions, all the same, and so were the eight between—that is, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20. Ralph and most other people familiar with Misk would have considered this sortie beyond his class, even in a dogsbody role. Some accounts said he'd been lookout, others that he ran the phone link at one of the hostage homes. But the rumours putting him on the operation in some sort of job persisted. And as soon as Ralph came down to meet the three, he did notice a new jauntiness in Articulate. That was how Ralph would describe it, "jauntiness." In his view, jauntiness in an established Monty member such as Max often meant a whack of recently obtained safe loot, "safe" indicating two factors: (a) it had been lifted from someone's *safe,* for example a Holborn, London, bank's, and (b) the notes were old and, therefore, reasonably *safe* to spend.

Shortlisted in 2006 for the U.K.'s most prestigious award for new crime fiction, the Duncan Lawrie Dagger, for *Wolves of Memory* (first U.S. publication W.W. Norton 6/06), Bill James is one of the most innovative writers in the genre. He also has a new nonseries novel out in the U.S. See *Letters From Carthage* (Severn House).

Usually, Ralph saw in Articulate the standard niggly, comical, defeated self-obsession of a small-time crook who believed unwaveringly that next week he'd be big-time, and who'd believed unwaveringly for an age he'd be big-time next week, these next weeks having slipped long ago into the past. Max's nickname came the satirical way some blubber lump weighing three hundred pounds might be called "Slim." More than any other quality, Articulate lacked articulateness, so, joke of jokes, label him with it. People mocked his taste for sullen silence. And, until now, in Ember's opinion, Misk had been the feeble sort who put up with mockery, possibly even expected it, not someone formidable and esteemed enough to get asked on to an enterprise like the I.C.D.S, all expenses paid, retrospectively.

One major point about Ralph Ember was he wanted to hoist the Monty to a much higher social level very soon, and people like Articulate and his relations would obviously be the first to get permanently kicked out. Ralph hoped to polish up the Monty to something like the prestige glow of big London clubs such as the Athenaeum or the Garrick, with their memberships of powerful

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and distinguished people—bishops, editors, high civil servants, TV faces, company chairmen. Articulate did not really suit. In fact, most of the present Monty membership did not really suit. Ralph would have bet the Athenaeum rarely staged celebration parties for jail releases, turf-war victories, suspended sentences, parole and bail successes. These happened regularly at his club.

Just the same, while Articulate and folk like him remained on the Monty's books, Ralph regarded it as a prime duty to treat them with all politeness and decency and, yes, friendliness, as if they truly counted for something. Membership of the Monty was membership of the Monty and entailed absolute recognition from its proprietor. Articulate and the two women called in the afternoon, when the club was quiet, so he could allow them some of his time. Ralph came to the Monty at these off-peak periods more often than previously, because he liked to do a thorough, undisturbed daily check on club security. Ralph naturally had enemies, and lately they had begun to look and sound a few troublesome degrees more focused. Anyone who collected £600,000 a year untaxed from drugs commerce, besides profits from the Monty and some entrepreneurial commissions, was sure to have envious enemies, well-focused envious enemies. Hence the H & K's. Hence, also, the shield fixed on one of the internal pillars and intended to give Ralph protection from gunfire when he sat behind the bar at a little shelf-desk checking on stock and sales. He'd had the shield covered with a collage of illustrations from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* a work by the poet William Blake, so that it would look like part of the décor and, in fact, add some class. But it was thick steel. In Shield Terrace he needed a shield. For instance, a lad called Luke Apsley Beynon had begun to get very bothersome. Something terminal might need to be done there before too long.

Mrs. Misk said as soon as Ralph joined them in the bar now: "Considerable legacies have recently come to us—to Edna, Max, and me—from my side of the family, Ralph."

"Always I'm confused in such cases about whether to offer congratulations or commiserations, since a legacy clearly implies a death, perhaps of a greatly loved one," Ember replied. He gave this ample solemnity, but not too much, in case the legacies mattered more to them than the loved one, who might have been hardly loved at all, just loaded. That is, supposing there had *been* a loved one to confer the legacies, and not simply the emptied Holborn bank. "I reconcile such opposites by thinking that the departed, although much missed, would wish his/her bequests to affect positively the future lives of those so favoured. This would be his/her motive, surely, in selecting them as beneficiaries." Before coming down from the office, Ralph had put the guns away and washed the cordite smell from his hands. These H & K's were necessary because of people like Beynon, but Ember hated any association of firearms

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with the club. Almost certainly no Athenaeum member carried a piece on the premises, unless, possibly, the head of MI5 belonged.

Articulate, his mother, and great-aunt would probably want to use Ralph and some of Ralph's connections to launder Misk's gains, now charmingly fictionalised as three legacies. Ralph could increase the Monty booze and cigarette orders, using their money to cover the additions. They would then resell the goods to clubs, pubs, off-licences. Plainly, they'd take an account-book loss, because Ralph required a commission, and the people they sold to would want good profit possibilities. But that was the standard way the market worked for difficult money, even untraceables. Also, as the currency for such trading had been stolen, it became crazy to speak of a loss. This amounted to a loss on treasure Articulate should never have had. Crucially, the wealth must not be spent in a style that drew attention or people would start asking how he and his family grew so rich so fast. Such people might be police people, such as Iles or Harpur. Dangerous. Or they might be villain people who'd decide that if Articulate had a lot they'd get some of it, at least some of it. Dangerous.

But drink and tobacco rated only as marginal elements in this type of business plan. Where there was real, lavish money, the lucky holders might, for instance, think about investing in properties, maybe for occupying themselves, or for renting out, or because, even in tricky economic times, most buildings kept their value or moved up. However, if Articulate and his mother and great-aunt Edna approached a normal estate agent and tried to buy four deluxe, five-bed, heated-pool, Doric-pillared, golf-village houses in the Algarve, Portugal, at 750,000 euros each, offering payment in cash, there would be some surprised, sharp intakes of professional breath and, afterwards, some sharp outgoings of professional breath in gossip about these potential customers who could cough approaching two million pounds sterling in suitcased notes. *Potential* customers might be as far as it went. Many—most?—normal estate agents would refuse to handle that kind of deal, despite longing for it and their cut, because they'd fear the wealth came from where it did come from, a bust, and that the culprits might one day be identified and their spending projects identified also. These potential customers could make *them* potential accessories, and possibly destroy the firm's reputation as upholders of that venerable, wise, holy code of behaviour laid down for estate agents.

But it was fairly generally recognised among Monty members that Ralph Ember knew certain professional people—solicitors, food inspectors, planning officials, and, especially, estate agents—who would find a way around venerable, wise, holy codes of behaviour if those codes seemed malevolently and perversely to be operating against the interests of buoyant trading in special markets. Such services were costly, yes, and so were middleman skills

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like Ralph's. Folk who collected heavy legacies could afford the best, though, and should expect to pay for it.

"These legacies we wish to be used positively," Mrs. Misk said.

"If I may say, this is what I would expect of your family," Ralph answered. "Positivism."

"Not frittered," she said.

This did sound to Ralph like property. Purchase of sizable villas in Portugal could not in any fashion be termed frittering.

"Or to put it briefly, Ralph, we want to share in your vision," Edna said. Fervour touched her voice.

"In which respect?" Ralph replied. So, *not* property. He thought he could guess what she might mean instead, but prayed he had this wrong.

"Yes, to be a part of it," Mrs. Misk said.

"In which respect?" Ralph replied.

Articulate had always seemed a bit passive as well as tongue-tied. His mother, and especially Great-Aunt Edna, handled family policy. Mrs. Rose Misk would be over sixty and Edna well over seventy. Their combined life experience left Articulate trailing. Even now, although Articulate somehow gave off the impression of a new confidence and bounce, he did not speak very much. The women dominated, maybe domineered. Edna almost always wore flashy red or green leather—trousers and tasselled jacket—including to major, formal Monty events such as celebrations of a christening or acquittal on a technicality. Today, red. She said: "We know you have wonderful ambitions for the Monty, Ralph—makeover ambitions."

"These inspire us," Rose Misk said.

"Yes," Articulate said. "Oh, definitely."

"This is why, as Rose remarked, we wish to be part of it, Ralph," Edna said.

Hell, he'd been right.

"The money—the legacies, that is—could be *so* vital here," Rose Misk said.

"Definitely," Articulate added.

"Your plan, your brilliant plan, will cost you a bit, Ralph," Edna said. "I hope you won't regard this as presumptuous, but we could help bankroll the transformation—would be proud to help bankroll the transformation."

"Exactly what I meant by not frittering," Rose said. "A worthwhile and, in our view—Edna's, Max's, and mine—a magnificently promising commitment."

"Definitely," Articulate said.

Edna said: "Without, I hope, being cruel, Ralph, we look at the club as it is now—the type of member, the need for a bulletproof slab up there to guard you—we look at all this and cannot believe the Monty today satisfies someone of your taste and refinement."

"No, no, not a shield," Ember said, with a fair show of amuse-

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ment. "It's a board to maximise ventilation by helping control air currents. But please don't ask me how!"

"All right, all right, we can understand why you don't want the Monty thought of as a pot-shot range," Rose said.

"We're talking of an infusion to the Monty development funds of at least hundreds of thousands, Ralph," Edna said. "As starters."

"That's it," Articulate said. New self-belief still brightened his features, but a kind of misery clothed these words.

"Your first move has to be expulsion of nearly all the present Monty membership, hasn't it, Ralph?" Edna said. "You won't draw the type of people you want while the club still looks like Lowlife Inc. Initially you'll have to take some mighty losses—ending of membership fees and, obviously, a collapse of bar profits. This could be where our funds became useful."

Edna's survey of the problems was spot-on, and Ralph vastly resented it. To him there seemed something indelicate about describing his cull plans with such disgusting accuracy. This was exactly the kind of crude approach to sensitive things that ensured Edna in her damn gear would be an early victim of a Monty clear-out, along with Articulate and his mother. Did Edna, this pushy, leathery, and leather-garbed old intruder, imagine she and the other two were "the type of people" he wanted? Did she think they could buy their way into not just assured membership of the new Monty with their bank loot, but perhaps take a share of the ownership and the profits through the size of their investment? She had her scheming eye on a partnership. Ralph regarded that as farcical, but it infuriated him.

He said with a happy lilt to his tone: "Many people come to me with ideas of development of the Monty, and I'm heartily grateful to them. And I'm heartily grateful to you now, Edna. These approaches—so positive and well-meant—show how fondly some members regard the club."

"The Monty's underachieving on its possibilities, Ralph," Rose Misk said.

And did they imagine he hadn't realised this? Did they think they could advise him about his own cherished club, cherished even in its present roughhouse state? "To all these proposals I listen with full interest and, as I say, gratitude," he replied. "It is encouraging to know there's a groundswell of creative ideas among the Monty's faithful. I ponder all these ideas, let me assure you, and at some stage ahead I might act on one of them, or perhaps a mixture of several. But at present those ideas have to remain as such—ideas only." He gave a small, regretful, but determined smile.

"This is the moment for it, Ralph," Edna said.

They were sitting at a table near the snooker alcove and Ralph had brought a bottle of Kressmann armagnac and glasses. He did some refilling. The club remained fairly quiet. A small group

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talked at the bar. Nobody played snooker.

Ember stood. "I have to get to my chores now," he said. "I'll leave the bottle. You chat on, by all means."

"But we haven't really got anywhere," Rose said.

"I certainly would not say that," Ralph said. "I've filed away in my head the very promising suggestions you've given me tonight. In due course, or even sooner, I will bring that file out and consider it properly in context."

"What does that mean?" Edna said.

"What?"

"'In context,'" Edna said.

"Yes, true, Edna. That has to be the way of it—in context," Ember replied.

"Part of the context now, Ralph, is that we have the funds entirely available and entirely ready," Edna said. "This might not be so 'in due course.' We wish to apply these legacies in forward-looking, rewarding fashion as an immediate priority, not 'in due course.' There are other openings for investment. We chose to put you and the Monty first on our schedule. If this does not attract an instant response, we might feel it right to turn elsewhere."

"I've come to learn that in this kind of business, the context, a review of all options, is vital," Ralph said. He left them and did an inspection of the snooker tables' baize to make sure there were no snags or rips. He felt proud of his management of the meeting with those three. At no point had he allowed his rage at their gross cheek and clumsiness to show itself. Snarls had ganged up inside him ready for use, but he had suppressed them.

He went home to his manor house, Low Pastures, for a sleep and stroll around the paddocks, and, as was routine, returned to the club just after one A.M. to supervise closedown for the night at two o'clock, unless extra merrymaking broke out. He sat at his shelf-desk behind the bar with another glass of Kressmann's, admiring the wild-looking William Blake pictures on the metal screen. Articulate Max, alone now, and in a fine, made-to-measure pinstripe suit and wide silver-and-yellow tie, came and took a high stool opposite him on the other side of the bar. He had a glass of what might be Kressmann's in his right hand. Perhaps he thought this a way to acceptance and fellow-feeling from Ember. "They won't give up, Ralph."

"Who?"

"Great-Aunt Edna and my mother."

"They're real Monty fans, I'll say that for them," Ember replied with an admiring chuckle.

"Such out-and-out rubbish," Articulate replied.

"What?"

"That idea—to put money into the club."

"I appreciated their affection for the Monty," Ember replied.

"Idiotic."

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"Oh?"

"Like throwing money down an old coal pit."

"Oh?"

"You know, I know, and so does everyone else with any trace of a brain that the Monty is never going to change, Ralph. Not change as they meant, anyway. I suppose the police might shut it down one day because of your drugs link."

Ember thought about hitting this jerk. He could stand and lean forward quickly and reach him across the bar. Ralph had never heard him put so many words together before, and now, when he did grow verbal, it was to insult Ralph and the Monty. "I wouldn't say your great-aunt Edna or your mother lacked brain, Articulate," he replied.

"The money has shoved them off-balance."

"The legacies?"

"That's it, the legacies. Yes, the legacies," Articulate said. "As if they feel they have to compensate for something."

"Compensate for what—for receiving a legacy?"

"That's it, Ralph. For receiving a legacy."

"A sort of guilt?"

"Yes, like guilt."

"Guilt because they and you have profited from a death? This does happen to legatees sometimes, I know. Guilt over where the money comes from."

"Yes, over where it comes from. So, to rid themselves of this shame, they want to find some noble project where they can put the lucre—and get a return. Some noble, mad project."

"I don't see it like that," Ember replied.

"No, I shouldn't think you do. Why I had to come tonight for a chinwag, on our own."

Ember found the Kressmann bottle and topped both of them up.

"Look, you're getting aggro, aren't you, Ralph?"

"Aggro?" Ember said, giving a real, puzzled smile.

"You wouldn't have stuck *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* up there otherwise, would you?"

"Much misunderstood," Ember replied. "That baffle board is to—"

"As I hear it, you've been on the end of very forceful invitations to take out a protection policy for the club, an invitation from Luke Apsley Beynon and his firm. That's the buzz."

And, as so often, the buzz had things wonderfully correct. The shield might help against Luke and his cohort. The H & K automatics might help against Luke and his cohort. The increased security visits by Ralph to the Monty might help against Luke and his cohort. Or none of them might help against Luke and his cohort. "Luke is getting to fancy himself a bit, I gather," Ember said with no tremor at all.

"Obviously someone of your calibre, Ralph, is not going to cave

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in to protection threats from an apprentice lout like Luke."

"Hardly. That is, if there'd been any threats."

"You'll turn down his invitations. And, that being so, there could be some grim events at the Monty to prove that you actually *need* the protection of Luke and his firm. Events such as gunfire or incendiarising or bad affrays and blood in the bar. Well, I don't need to describe it. You know how club protection works."

Ralph said: "It's kind of you to look in, Max, but I don't really think someone like Luke Beynon could—"

"Here's the bargain, then, Ralph," Articulate replied. "I'll get rid of Beynon if you promise you won't ever pick up on that offer from my mother and Great-Aunt Edna." He became intense. "Listen, Ralph, all due respect to you and the Monty, but I'm not going to have my money squandered like that by two old dames suddenly gone ga-ga. You said you'd file their notion away for another consideration sometime. I want you to keep it filed away, or, even better, ditch it."

"*Your* money? It wouldn't all be yours, would it? I thought there were *three* legacies."

"Yes, well, let's not play about any longer, all right? *My* money. *My* earned money. Mine but . . . Ralph, I've always let my mother and Great-Aunt Edna organise the big things in my life, you know."

"That so?"

"Look at me, Ralph."

"Yes?"

"I'll tell you what you see, shall I?"

"What I see is—"

"You see a bloke of thirty-two in a suit that cost over two grand, physically sound, and suddenly very successful."

"Successful. You mean getting the legacy?"

"Right, getting the legacy."

The description Articulate gave of himself was not bad, although it didn't deal with the wide shoulders on a thin body and his longish, deadpan face, as if purposefully manufactured to defeat interrogation. He had a large but unmirthful mouth, skimpy fair eyebrows, and bleak blue eyes.

"I respect Mum and Great-Aunt Edna, naturally. That will never alter. But I can't be run by them anymore. I'm grown-up, Ralph."

The bank raid had transformed him. This was not just a matter of what Ralph thought of at first as "jauntiness." That could come and go. Max had climbed a little late into maturity and would stay there. He could spiel. He fancied himself as a warrior now—a warrior who could still show gallant deference to his mother and great-auntie Edna, but who also knew that a true warrior's main and perhaps only real role was to fight and kill. He'd had a makeover.

Ember said: "There's a phrase for this—'rites of passage.'"

"Great. I could get fond of phrases." Articulate put an arm across the bar, skirting the Kressmann bottle with its striking black

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label. "A handshake will do for us, I think, Ralph," he said. It was clipped, matey, foursquare. "You keep turning down my mother's and great-aunt Edna's loony scheme for my funds and I see to Luke Apsley Beynon."

Ralph took his hand with wholehearted firmness. Sure. This agreement could only be a bonus. He would never have given Great-aunt Edna, Mrs. Misk, and Articulate the least financial footing in the Monty, anyway, and, yes, Luke Beynon *was* beginning to look more and more like severe peril.

And, because Beynon looked more and more like severe peril, Ralph went again to the Monty during the afternoon next day to do his security checks. He was touring the Monty yard to satisfy himself no mysterious packages had been left against club doors when an unmarked Volvo drove in and parked. Assistant Chief Constable Desmond Iles and Detective Chief Superintendent Colin Harpur left the car and walked towards him, Iles looking as jolly as napalm. These two often arrived at the Monty, on the face of it to see that all licensing conditions were observed, but actually, in Ralph's view, to terrorise the members and enjoy a few free drinks. "Hunting firebombs, Ralphy?" Iles said.

Ember took them to the bar and mixed a gin and cider in a half-pint glass for Harpur and a port and lemonade for Iles, "the old whore's quaff," as he described it. Today, although it was only afternoon, the club had twenty or so members in, mostly at the bar or playing snooker and pool. Iles did his usual arrogant glare about, as if he couldn't believe how some of these people, or any of them, could be out of jail.

They sat at a table, Ember again on the armagnac. Harpur said: "I gather Articulate was here last night for quite a dialogue. Has he suddenly turned *really* articulate? He's emerged somehow?"

"I see such one-to-one conversations with long-time members as a very worthwhile and, indeed, pleasurable experience," Ralph replied, "and an essential factor in one's job as host."

"How true," Iles replied.

"Handshaking, also," Harpur said.

"We're civilised, you know, Mr. Harpur. All the usual courtesies are practised at the Monty," Ember replied. It always hurt him to think the club had members who watched things here and straight off reported to the police, for some measly fee, most likely.

"And then Articulate and his mother and great-aunt Edna in earlier," Harpur said. He was big and thuggish-looking, some said like a fair-haired Rocky Marciano, the one-time heavyweight champion of the world. Alongside him, Iles looked dainty, but in fact lacked all daintiness.

"This sounds like real activity," Harpur said.

"What does?" Ember said.

"These visits," Harpur said.

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"This is a club. People drop in," Ember replied.

Iles said: "We wondered, Colin and I, whether you could recall the gist of your talk with Articulate, or even with Articulate and his mother and great-aunt Edna."

"I talk to many members over any twenty-four hours, you know," Ralph said.

"They're lucky to have you," Iles said. "Everyone realises that. But don't muck Col and me about, Ralph, there's a chum. Just give us what Max said, what you said, what the women said, would you? Something agreed at the afternoon meeting and then Articulate comes in late to confirm? Or cancel?"

"Casual conviviality, that's all. You make it all sound very purposeful and businesslike, Mr. Iles," Ralph said, "whereas—"

"Yes, purposeful and businesslike," Iles said. "That's our impression."

"Your impression via a fink," Ember said—"as through a grass darkly."

"Wow, Ralph!" Iles said.

"It's the later conversation that really interests us," Harpur said.

"Generalities, I should think," Ember said. He did a frown to indicate he meant to try to help them and recollect. "Weather. Holidays. Cricket. The usual small talk. We try to avoid politics—too controversial. I bump into so many people in the club and have a few unimportant yet, I trust, comradely words. These little powwows seem to merge into one pleasant and not very significant encounter. I don't know whether Max would recall things better than I. It might be in your interests to talk to him, if you feel something significant might have come up."

"The thing about Articulate is, he's dead," Iles replied.

"My God," Ralph said. The shock was real.

"Which is why what he talked about with you might be to the point," Harpur said.

"Generalities," Ralph said.

"Shot," Harpur replied.

"My God," Ralph said.

"Our impression is that he meant to bop Luke Apsley Beynon, but got bopped himself," Harpur said.

"As most of us would have forecast," Iles said. "I mean, was Articulate Max anywhere near capable as executioner?"

"The whisper's around, isn't it, that he was in on the I.C.D.S. robbery with some sort of stooge function?" Harpur said. "Did that make him feel suddenly big and mature and competent—and free up his voice box?"

"Poor deluded prat," Iles said. "He gave himself a mission on your behalf? Luke Apsley Beynon's been breathing untender words to you, hasn't he, Ralph? This is our information."

"Luke Beynon?" Ember replied.

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"Did Articulate, with his new gloss, offer to knock him over for you?" Iles said. "Suddenly he thinks he's one of Nature's hit men? Were you and he talking some kind of deal? You'll see why we're concerned about his appearances here, especially the second one, without his minders, the women. Did he need to say something they shouldn't hear?"

"Deal?" Ember said.

"*Quid pro quo*ism of some sort," Iles said.

"Generalities," Ralph replied.

"We're charging Luke," Harpur said. "He'll go down. His firm will break up without him."

"So you don't come out of this at all too badly, Ralph, do you?" Iles said. "You won't have to cower behind the collage anymore."

Ember replenished their drinks and took more armagnac himself. "I think about his mother and great-aunt Edna," he said.

"Those two are provided for, we believe," Iles said.

"I mean their grief," Ralph said.

"You were always one for tenderness to prized Monty members, Ralphy," Iles replied. ●

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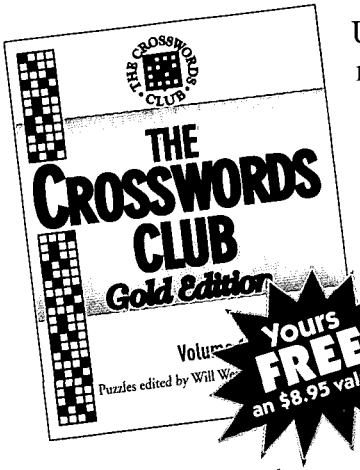

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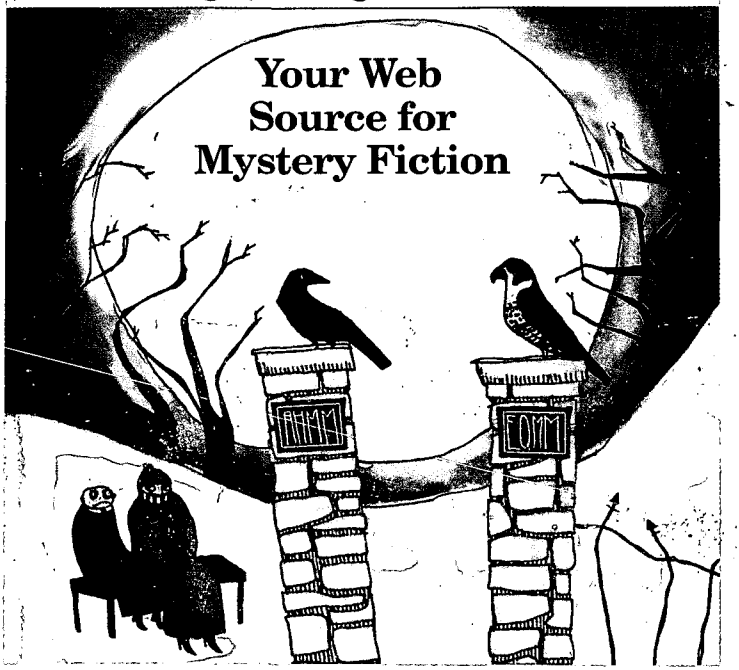

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